The New Criterion

February 1991

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
John Richardson's "Picasso" *by Hilton Kramer*, 4
The MLA in Chicago *by Roger Kimball*, 8
Sylvia Plath *by Bruce Bawer*, 18
Abstract Expressionism revisited *by Karen Wilkin*, 28
Nabokov's Russian years *by John Simon*, 35
New poems *by Walter Griffin, John Matthias & Patricia Hooper*, 46

Music: Shostakovich decoded? *by Samuel Lipman*, 50; **Art:** After the fall *by Jed Perl*, 55; Brancusi *by Eric Gibson*, 58; **Theater:** The Group *by Donald Lyons*, 62
Books: *Lorne Campbell* Renaissance portraits *reviewed by Creighton Gilbert*, 67; *Kathrine Jason, editor* Name and tears and other stories *reviewed by Sam Tanenhaus*, 72; *Alfred Corn, editor* Incarnation *reviewed by C. H. Sisson*, 75; *A. S. Byatt* Possession *reviewed by Donna Rifkind*, 77; **Shorter notices** *by Robert Richman & Christopher Carduff*, 80; **Notebook:** Erich Heller *by Joseph Epstein*, 83; **Letters**, 87

Volume 9, Number 6, $4.00

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Graham Nickson, Paul Resika and the estate of Jack Bush

are now represented exclusively by

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York, NY 10021

Tel (212) 879-6606 Fax 212 744 0655

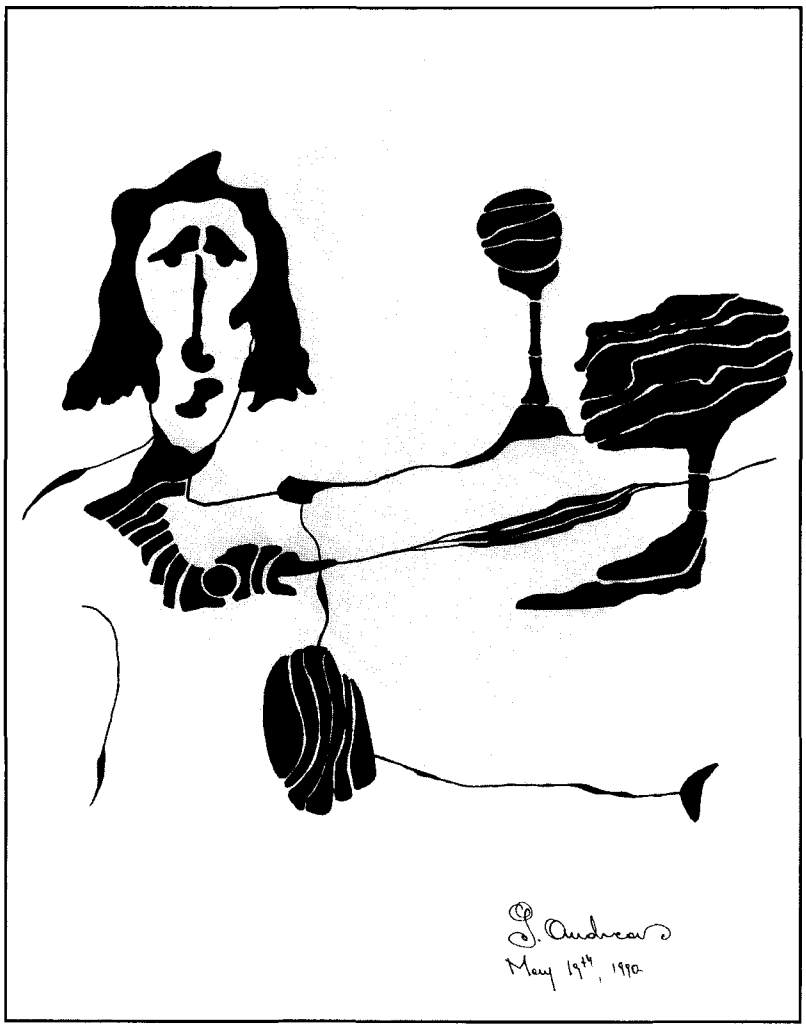
Monday - Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

456 North Camden Drive Beverly Hills, CA 90210

Tel (213) 879-6606 Fax 213 247 1505

Monday - Saturday 10 to 6, Thursday until 8

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



UNTITLED, 1990 — 11" × 15", India Ink on Paper

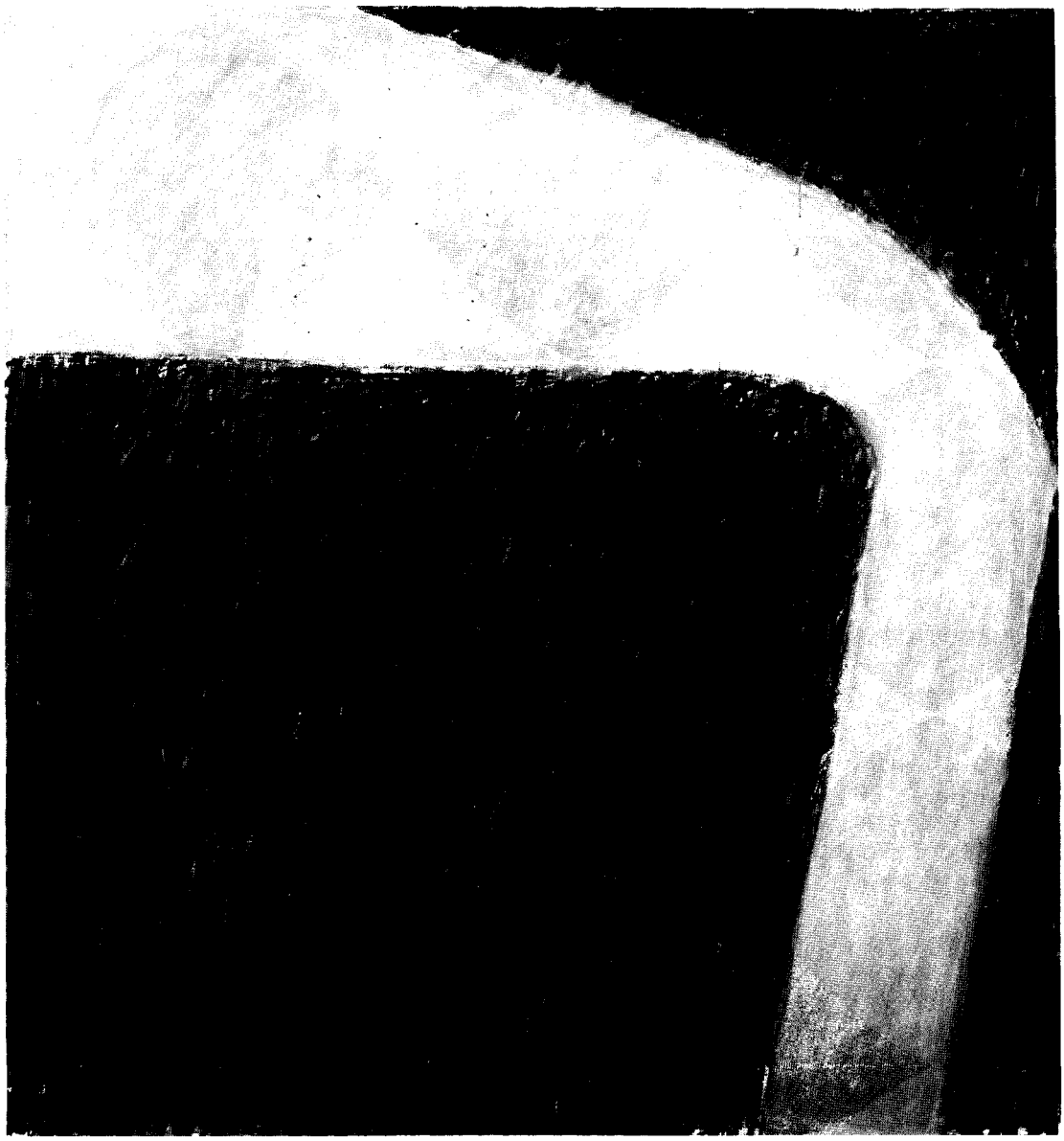
GEORGE ANDREAS

Paintings & Drawings

ANDREAS GALLERIES

8545 LEESBURG PIKE
VIENNA, VIRGINIA 22182
703-448-2222
FAX 703-356-3328

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Field, 1965. Oil on linen, 80″ × 73″ (203 × 185 cm)

Jack Tworkov

Paintings from 1930 to 1981 · February 7 to March 9

André Emmerich Gallery

41 East 57th Street, New York 10022 Telephone (212) 752-0124 Fax (212) 371-7345

An illustrated catalogue with 12 color plates and an essay by Elizabeth Frank is available at $20.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *February 1991*

Editor *Hilton Kramer*
Publisher *Samuel Lipman*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Assistant Managing Editor *Christopher Carduff*
Office Manager *Marjorie Danser*
Editorial Intern *Julia Hodges Bovey*

Contributors to this issue

Bruce Bawer's most recent book is *Diminishing Fictions* (Graywolf Press).

Christopher Carduff was a trade book editor before joining the staff of *The New Criterion*.

Joseph Epstein's essay in this issue was read at a memorial service for Erich Heller at Northwestern University on December 5, 1990.

Eric Gibson is the art critic for *The Washington Times*.

Creighton Gilbert recently received the honorary degree of doctor of humane letters from Adelphi University.

Walter Griffin's poems have appeared in *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Paris Review*.

Patricia Hooper's poems have appeared in *The American Scholar* and *Poetry*.

Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals*, will soon be out in paperback from HarperCollins.

Samuel Lipman's new essay collection, *Arguing for Music, Arguing for Culture*, is published by David R. Godine.

Donald Lyons is the regular theater critic for *The New Criterion*.

John Matthias is the author of *A Gathering of Ways* (Swallow Press).

Jed Perl's art chronicle, *Gallery Going: Four Seasons in the Art World*, will be published in May by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Robert Richman is the editor of *The Direction of Poetry*, published by Houghton Mifflin.

Donna Rifkind's essays and reviews have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and other publications.

John Simon reviews theater for *New York* and films for *National Review*.

C. H. Sisson's most recent book is *In Two Minds: Guesses at Other Writers* (Carcanet).

Sam Tanenhaus has written extensively on Italian literature, most recently an essay on Calvino for Scribner's *European Writers* series.

Karen Wilkin's monograph on Kenneth Noland has just been published by Rizzoli.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. February 1991, Volume 9, Number 6. Subscriptions: $32 for one year, $60 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

Copyright © 1991 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc.

U.S.A. newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. British distribution by Central Books Ltd., 14 The Leathermarket, London SE1 3ER. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 226, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set with the Flexicon Composer from Emerging Technology and is printed by Science Press of Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: February 1991

A farewell to decency

It was no doubt to be expected that the failure of the courts to formulate a workable definition of obscenity in the arts would sooner or later prompt a further erosion of the standards likely to obtain in publicly funded cultural programs in this country. This is what has now happened—and pretty much on schedule, too—with the refusal of the National Council on the Arts and the chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts to honor the so-called "decency" provision in the legislation reauthorizing the operations of the NEA for another three years.

The new legislation, which was passed by Congress in October after a good deal of delay, uproar, and debate, requires the chairman of the NEA to take cognizance of "general standards of decency" in determining the agency's grants to both individual artists and arts institutions. It is this obligation that the current chairman of the NEA, John E. Frohnmayer, has refused, declaring that "I am not going to be a decency czar here." At its meeting on December 14, the National Council supported Mr. Frohnmayer's decision by a vote of 12 to 0.

Exactly where this decision leaves the NEA in relation to the law governing its reauthorization is anyone's guess. The courts cannot decide the decency issue. The White House apparently takes no interest in the matter. And Congress, even while invoking "general standards of decency" as a need to be met, managed to blur the issue by also requiring the chairman of the NEA to "respect the diverse beliefs of the American public." In the current political climate, "diversity" is, of course, a code word, and what it is likely to mean in this instance is that assaults on "general standards of decency" made in the name of art will be accorded a status equal—and in some cases, even a little more than equal—to that of the "general standards" to be observed. Which in practical terms means that as far as publicly funded arts grants are concerned, the concept of decency will follow the idea of obscenity straight into oblivion.

It has been claimed by certain arts-advocacy groups that decency is too vague an idea to be applied in this matter. Indeed, one member of the National Council on the Arts announced, according to *The New York Times*, that "No one knows what [decency] is." In regard to legal definitions of the term, this may very well be true. But there are many important things in both life and art that cannot be legally defined, and it isn't really true that no one knows what decency is. Certainly the artists, or would-be artists, who are programmatically committed to mounting

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

assaults on what Congress described as "general standards of decency" know very well what those standards are at any given moment. If they did not recognize such standards, they would have no interest in violating them. It is precisely the ambition to topple these standards that has caused the NEA so much grief in recent years. It is therefore the sheerest hypocrisy to claim that no one knows what decency is. What this claim really means is that it must now be left to the enemies of "general standards of decency" to determine what those standards are to be in the future. The defenders of decency are to have no voice in the matter.

Let us remember that we are speaking here of a doctrine promulgated by a legally constituted agency of the federal government. What this agency is saying to the taxpayers who provide the funds for its operations is that general standards of decency can now play no role in determining judgments. Only those who receive money from this agency are to be allowed to formulate such standards. Which in practice, of course, will mean there are to be no standards at all.

The NEA and the states

Meanwhile, back at the NEA in Washington, a decision has been made on just how to obey last fall's congressional mandate to transfer some twelve million dollars of annual program funds from federal to state auspices. This innocent-sounding provision, removing a further 15 percent of the NEA's funds from its grant-making discretion (20 percent already go to the states), is perhaps the most substantive change wrought by all the scandals in the last two years about art subsidies for obscene and sacrilegious purposes.

This shift of power from the NEA to state arts councils was the legislative brainchild of Representative E. Thomas Coleman (R.-Missouri), and doubtless was originally inspired by the politically powerful National Association of State Arts Agencies, the states' chief lobby in these matters. In recent years, the relation in arts funding between the federal government and the states has become increasingly marked by political rivalry and bureaucratic rancor. The matter can be put simply: subsidizing the arts has become too good a thing, for too many people, to avert constant battling over the division of the spoils.

The name of the game, of course, is spreading the money around to the maximum number of recipients. It is significant that the NEA has managed to free by far the largest part of the funds it will now hand over to the states by making across-the-board reductions of grant amounts; the agency has once again avoided facing up to eliminating some recipients and some programs so that others, better qualified, might be held harmless. Music grantees will be cut by nearly two million dollars, as will museums. But the number of grants will remain constant. The NEA has long known that in numbers is safety; cutting everyone equally makes for the largest amount of political pressure on Congress to increase NEA appropriations.

It must be said as well that Congress ensured that the new money for the states would be apportioned not simply according to each state's level of activity or even of public support; almost half the funds will be spent on minimum grants of ninety thousand dollars to each state, regardless of size, population, or involvement with the arts. The resulting windfall for the smaller states, even though they may have little of artistic distinction going on in them, will be proportionately great, a fact that will be proudly noted during the next elections for the U.S. Congress.

What will the states use the new money for? Here the picture is grim: the *New York Times*'s William H. Honan has reported that

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

while Tennessee will use the funds for medium-sized and large institutions, New York will spend the money "to avoid laying off employees in folk arts programs and replace cuts in the agency's travel budget"; Idaho will "direct the money chiefly to local arts councils throughout the state, which will use it for presenting local and national arts groups." It is also highly likely that a significant part of the new money will find its way to what might be called the neighborhood avant-garde, that politically and socially squeaky wheel that intelligent officials now find it prudent to grease.

One thing is certain. Increased funding to the states will in no way make up the losses quality institutions will suffer because of cuts on the federal level. And so it is plain that this new legislative provision, so widely trumpeted as returning power to the people, is nothing more than a cynical political ploy to preserve the potential constituency for public arts support while at the same time enabling our elected representatives to claim credit for bringing home the bacon. It is curious indeed that all this has been done as part of a well-earned backlash against the whole notion of public arts support.

From the archives of the academy:

ETS 443-2 Studies in Cultural Theories of Representation: Eurocentrism, (Post)coloniality, Revolution

Instructor: Mas'ud Zavarzadeh *TTh 11:30*

The course inquires into the political economy of cultural representation and produces a marxist critique of dominant knowledges. Its analytical axes evolve around the questions of class, historical materialism, totality, race, and the economics of the "metropole" and "periphery." It also engages the problematics of the "Asiatic mode of production"; the "subaltern"; the geopolitics of "Oriental despotism"; the politics of (Western) feminism and women of colour; the nation, and imperialism. One of the discourses of this inquiry is the relation between (de)colonialization and (de)construction: what are effectivities and politics of bourgeois theory for emancipatory practices of transformative politics and for "reading" (post)colonial texts (e.g., Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," Foucault, "Iran: The Spirit of a World Without Spirit")? What, in other words, are the consequences of "discursive politics" in the moment of the (post)colonial? Adjacent to this discourse, the course (re)opens the question of "revolution" through a (re)turn to Fanon, Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Cabral, Teitelboim . . . "Intifada," A.N.C. . . .

From *The English Newsletter: Undergraduate News from the English Department, Syracuse University*, Volume 1, Number 2, November 1990.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The young Picasso

by Hilton Kramer

The strong should go ahead and take what they want.
—Picasso to Leo Stein, 1906.

With the publication of the first volume of John Richardson's new biography of Picasso, we now have the most complete account of the artist's early years we are likely to be given for the foreseeable future.[1] The first thing to be said about this book is that it is at once a triumph of the biographer's art and one of the most illuminating studies yet written about a major figure of the modern movement. It is certainly one of the most absorbing books about an artist of any period that I have read—one of the most troubling, too—and the completed work is likely to stand as a landmark in the historiography of modern art.

With three more volumes still to come, the most momentous artistic achievements of Picasso's long and tumultuous career remain, of course, to be charted by Mr. Richardson. But the essential lineaments of the artist's character, the shaping of the outlook on art and life that governed his many subsequent endeavors, and what in general may be called the nature of the moral universe inhabited by Picasso from an early age—these are already clearly in focus in this first volume, which closes in 1906.

Picasso is twenty-five and enjoying his first taste of fame at the end of Volume I. He is about to embark on the painting that Mr. Richardson describes, without hyperbole, as "the first unequivocally twentieth-century masterpiece, a principal detonator of the modern movement, the corner-stone of twentieth-century art"—*Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon* (1907). Yet this first volume is by no means all prologue. Its cast of characters is large and crucial to our understanding of Picasso's development, its historical *mise en scène* teeming with the ideas, ambitions, and conflicts that set the course of art and culture for decades to come (and that, in many respects, set it still). At the center of the drama so vividly rendered in these pages is the transformation of the young aspiring artist—*le petit Goya* from provincial Málaga—into *le grand Picasso*, "this Nietzschean Dionysos," as Mr. Richardson calls him, "a new champion ready to take on all comers."

About this transformation, which changed the face of art so decisively in this century, Mr. Richardson has many new things to tell us, and much that we already know—or think we know—is somewhat altered by the new context in which he places it. About his own life Picasso was a tireless mythmaker, and he made a point of surrounding himself with writers who could be relied upon to support the fictions he so much preferred to the reality of his early struggles. By and large, it is these fictions that have dominated previous biographies of the artist, and not the

1 *A Life of Picasso. Volume I: 1881-1906*, by John Richardson, with the collaboration of Marilyn McCully; Random House, 560 pages, $39.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

least of Mr. Richardson's achievements in this book is his refusal to go along with them. He takes nothing for granted, and he is expert at establishing precisely the kind of distinctions that Picasso lavished much effort on concealing.

Take, for example, what Mr. Richardson describes as "Picasso's retrospective view of himself as a prodigy who was endowed from earliest days with the mastery of a Raphael." Studying the drawings that Picasso was obliged to complete in order to gain entrance to the art academy called La Llotja in Barcelona in 1895, Mr. Richardson offers the following analysis:

> The famous legend launched by his friend and biographer Roland Penrose and repeated by virtually every other authority—that this "test, for which one month was prescribed, was completed by [Picasso] in exactly one day"—does not stand up to investigation. Although the standard Llotja test involved three drawing categories, there was no question of its taking a month. . . . Any halfway gifted student could have completed these drawings in a day, but two days were allotted for the task. . . . Penrose maintains that members of the jury "were at once convinced that they were faced, for the first and perhaps the last time, with a prodigy," but there is no evidence of any such conviction; nor do these run-of-the-mill drawings proclaim the prodigy.

This leads Mr. Richardson to an even more important point. By perpetuating the myth of the prodigy, he writes, Penrose actually "belittles the young artist's unremitting efforts to perfect his technique."

> We need only compare these curiously tentative "test" drawings [Mr. Richardson writes] with one done the following year to see that Picasso's development depended at least as much on the infinite pains he took as on the infinite gifts with which he was born.

He then goes on to underscore another important aspect of this episode that has been obscured with the passage of time:

> Pablo actually respected the director of the school—an indifferent portraitist called Antoni Caba—respected him for insisting that students draw and draw from the model, a discipline that Picasso advocated to his dying day. Picasso may have despised academicism; he did not despise academic teaching.

This example will have to stand for the many other revisions that Mr. Richardson has brought to the story of Picasso's early artistic development. He is similarly illuminating about the intellectual influences, first in Barcelona and then in Paris, that shaped Picasso's view of art and culture and society, not to mention life itself. In his account of the intellectual bohemia that Picasso, in his teens and still living at home with his parents, frequented in Barcelona in the 1890s—a world that offered a heady amalgam of political anarchism, Catalan nationalism, Nineties aestheticism, and Nietzschean immoralism—Mr. Richardson proves to be an accomplished cultural historian. We seldom think of Picasso as a typical product of the Nineties, yet in some respects he was. Certainly the Blue Period paintings owe much to Nineties aestheticism, and the radical ethos of the period played a definitive role in a good deal that followed. What Mr. Richardson describes as "the focal point of [Picasso's] life" in Barcelona, the café called Els Quatre Gats, was, as he writes, "a rallying place for supporters of the Catalan *Renaixenca*, whether they were *modernistes*, *anarquistas*, or *decadentes*, whether interested in symbolism, Kropotkin, or Oscar Wilde." It was in this milieu that the young artist repudiated his bourgeois origins for a more or less permanent bohemianism, and renounced the feeble academicism associated with his father—a failed artist and art teacher—for the modernism that would later bring him his greatest glory. Mr. Richardson also suggests that it may have been at this time, as the result of the emotions aroused by the Spanish-American War, that Picasso began to nurture the hostile political attitudes toward the United States so familiar to us from the Cold War period.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

About the artist's much written-about first attempts to establish himself in Paris at the turn of the century, Mr. Richardson also gives us the best account that we have. As we would expect from so knowledgeable a writer, every shift in style and subject matter in Picasso's art is traced with close attention, and so are the artist's relations with the first Parisian dealers he had any contact with. Yet of even greater importance, perhaps, is Mr. Richardson's detailed account of the ideas that exerted a decisive influence on his art —ideas that, in a good many cases, outlived the early styles that gave them their first expression.

It was in this respect that the writers to whom Picasso responded so shrewdly came to play a major role in his thought. Writers had already served this purpose for Picasso in Barcelona and Madrid, but in Paris they were to prove of even greater importance to him. The first "to guide his steps through the maze of French culture," as Mr. Richardson writes, was the poet Max Jacob, who also taught him the language he could not yet speak with any fluency or ease. "If Picasso eventually learned to speak French that was idiomatic and witty, and on occasion eloquent (despite a heavy Spanish accent), it was almost entirely due to the poet's tuition," Mr. Richardson writes, and then adds:

> Jacob's place in Picasso's life would be usurped but never left unfilled. For the next sixty years or so the artist would always have his own poet laureate—preferably someone with the advantage of a painterly as well as poetic sensibility, the better to crossfertilize his imagination. Max Jacob was the first in a line that would later include Apollinaire, Cocteau, Breton and Eluard (some might add Gertrude Stein), each of whom influenced Picasso's life as well as his work. Jacob opened up Picasso's mind to the beauty of the French language by putting him through an intensive course in French literature. His gifts as a performer brought new life to poets that Picasso had known only in translation: Racine, Corneille, Baudelaire, above all Verlaine. Jacob's dislikes should also be taken into consideration. He dismissed Mallarmé as a stilted obscurantist . . . and he accused Rimbaud of standing for disorder, which he abhorred. (Jacob's successor, Apollinaire, would be the one to convert Picasso to the view that "there are no other poets. Rimbaud is the only one.")

Apollinaire's taste and influence was indeed a good deal more radical.

> He opened up [Picasso's] imagination to a vast new range of intellectual stimuli: to new concepts of black humor, to the pagan past and the wilder shores of sex. Apollinaire, who was already obsessed by the works of the Marquis de Sade—"the freest spirit that has ever existed," he wrote—had no difficulty converting Picasso to the cult of the Divine Marquis, not just his pornography but his philosophy, his definition of art as "the perpetual immoral subversion of the existing order."

All of which was to have an impact on the conception of *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*—and much else—as were the work and example of Alfred Jarry.

The role of Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo was rather different, though not unrelated. The Steins came into Picasso's life as collectors of his work, but Gertrude was to become something more—a friend and muse of a sort. "Picasso," Mr. Richardson writes, "felt some kind of visceral reverence for Gertrude," and his famous portrait of her was, among much else, a monument to his special feeling for her. It was also through the Steins that Picasso met Matisse, the only artist he ever acknowledged as an equal among his rivals in the Paris avant-garde, and it was they, too, who incited Picasso's fierce sense of competition with Matisse, who, until the creation of *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*, remained the recognized leader of the avant-garde.

One of the critical high points of this book is, in fact, Mr. Richardson's account of the extent to which Matisse's painting called *Le Bonheur de Vivre* (1905-6), in the Barnes Foundation, had, as he says, "fired Picasso,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

once and for all, to go one better" by creating *Les Desmoiselles.* Matisse's *Le Bonheur de Vivre* was far more advanced than anything Picasso had yet attempted, and as Mr. Richardson writes, "he could no longer allow Matisse's supremacy to go unchallenged."

But in everything that Mr. Richardson writes about the kind of interest Picasso took in other artists, we are treated to criticism of a high order. The pages devoted to the discovery of Gauguin and Ingres, and to the use Picasso made of them, are particularly fine. No work of art is reduced to a biographical datum, however, though many are properly used to illuminate the biographical narrative.

As to the man whose early life is retraced so brilliantly in this book, it must be said that he comes through, more often than not, as an even more appalling character than the one we thought we knew—a genius no doubt, but an appalling one, all the same. From his days as an adolescent freeloader and whoremaster to his career as, in Mr. Richardson's words, a "lifelong misogynist"; from the spoiled youth who was so conspicuously lacking in what Mr. Richardson calls "moral courage" to the grown man who delighted in humiliating those who had served him most faithfully—in virtually every phase of his extraordinary youth and early manhood, Picasso showed himself to be the very model of the Nietzschean immoralist. That he was a great artist—great even in this early period of his development—there can be no question. That he was a terrible man, there can also, I believe, be no question. And there is surely worse to come in the remaining volumes of this biography. It is Mr. Richardson's achievement in this book to have given us the most intelligent and unblinking account of both the monster and the genius that we have.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The periphery vs. the center: the MLA in Chicago

by Roger Kimball

[M]ost of what is written in [today's] journals is either hopelessly ignorant, deliberately obscurantist, commercially compromised, or politically motivated. . . . As a result, the very notion of an independent high culture and the distinctions that separate it from popular culture and commercial entertainment have been radically eroded. . . . This fateful collapse in critical standards . . . and in the very idea of critical disinterestedness . . . has changed, and changed very much for the worse, the way the arts and humanities are now studied in our universities. . . . We are still living in the aftermath of the insidious assault on the mind that was one of the most repulsive features of the radical movement of the Sixties. . . . In everything from the writing of textbooks to the reviewing of trade books, from the introduction of kitsch into the museums to the decline of literacy in the schools to the corruption of scholarly research, the effect on the life of culture has been ongoing and catastrophic.

—"A Note on *The New Criterion*," September 1982.

Chicago's sobriquet, "the Windy City," seemed doubly appropriate at the end of December. In addition to the frigid winter blasts, the snow, the icy rain, and the other seasonal vagaries that contribute to the city's festive spirit, the Modern Language Association convoked its 106th annual convention, filling (or shall we say "colonizing"?) the halls and meeting rooms of the Hyatt Regency and other downtown hotels with gusts as chilling and impenetrable in their own way as any north wind barrelling in off Lake Michigan. From December 27 through 30, more than ten thousand members of the largest and most influential academic organization in the United States congregated in ritual displays of professional activity. Fledgling members came seeking jobs or contacts; the tenured elite interviewed and passed judgment on suppliants; young and old alike browsed among the publishers' exhibitions, delivered papers, and sampled the nearly seven hundred panels and social events that were crowded into the four-day meeting.

For several years now, the annual meeting of the MLA has provided observers of the academic scene with a spectacle as appalling as it is rich in unintended comedy. The full range of barbarous jargon, intellectual posturing, and aggressive politicization that has infected the academic study of the humanities in this country is in full, florid bloom at the MLA. To be sure, not all who flock to these meetings are happy about the recent assaults on the humanities. Because the annual meeting of the MLA also functions as the major clearing house for jobs in the modern languages and literatures, many academics come simply because they are looking for employment, or for employees, and have themselves little or no sympathy with the radical agenda that governs the activities and policies of the MLA. Nor are all the sessions devoted to esoteric trivia or politicized

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

prosyletizing. Among the thousands of papers delivered at the convention this year, some dealt straightforwardly with technical matters—using new research tools, for example, or "Teaching and Learning German,"—and some were traditional exercises in scholarship or literary criticism. Thus two of the three papers in the General Session on John Milton that I attended were clearly written, incisive efforts to come to terms with legitimate issues in Milton interpretation or scholarship, while the third—a vaguely deconstructivist performance entitled "Writing the Inside Out: Shakespeare, Milton, and the Supplement of Publication"—was merely tedious.

Nevertheless, the tenor of the convention —as, indeed, the tenor of the profession as a whole—is established not by the politically disengaged rank and file but by tenured or soon-to-be-tenured radicals who view the teaching of literature primarily as a species of ideological activism. It is true that the precise components of that activism will vary depending on the nature of the politics involved. Radical feminists have their issues and controversies, which tend to differ from issues and controversies that preoccupy the deconstructionists; champions of ethnic studies generally pursue an agenda quite distinct from that pursued by their feminist or deconstructionist colleagues; and proponents of homosexual studies busy themselves with yet other figures, commitments, and problems.

Despite the various issues that distinguish these and other groups, however, they are in many ways united. All reject the ideal of scholarly disinterestedness; all exhibit a pervasive animus against the achievements and values of Western culture; all systematically subjugate the teaching and study of literature to political imperatives; and all are extraordinarily intolerant of dissent. As I have noted previously in these pages,[1] the rise of multiculturalism as an omnibus term for the new academic orthodoxy has provided common cause and something of a common vocabulary for a profession otherwise riven by an allegiance to competing radicalisms. At the center of the multiculturalist ethos is the contention that all cultures are equally valuable and, therefore, that preferring one culture, intellectual heritage, or moral and social order to another is to be guilty of ethnocentricism and racism. Preferring Western culture and its heritage to others is held to be especially ethnocentric and racist. The thoughtless egalitarianism behind these ideas helps to explain the current academic obsession with the notion of "difference" and the widespread insistence that our differences—of race, class, sexuality, and ethnic heritage—must be given priority over our common humanity.

This celebration of "difference" may sound like a prescription for tolerance and genuine pluralism. But in fact it has fostered a positively Orwellian situation where "diversity" really means strict intellectual conformity, and "tolerance" is reserved exclusively for those who subscribe to one's own perspective. As has been widely reported in the press recently, attempts to enforce the ethic of "difference" have led to egregious violations of academic freedom and have poisoned the atmosphere for honest intellectual exchange at campuses across the country. Deviation from the multiculturalist orthodoxy on any number of issues is punished by social ostracism, mandatory "consciousness-raising" classes, or even suspension or expulsion.

It is precisely this cluster of phenomena that is summed up in the phrase "political correctness." Whatever demurrals some individual members may voice, it has been obvious for some time that the MLA represents the epicenter of academic political correctness in the humanities. Because the rise of political correctness signals both intellectual intolerance and a politically motivated betrayal of literature, it is worth taking a critical look at the controversies and proceedings of the 106th convention of the Modern Language Association.

1 "Tenured Radicals: A Postscript," *The New Criterion*, January 1991, pages 4-13.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

How, specifically, do the multiculturalist imperatives of political correctness manifest themselves in the subjects addressed at a major academic convention on literature? For one thing, literature itself takes a distant back seat to a wide variety of currently fashionable ideological concerns. While there were still some panels that devoted themselves to dealing with literary subjects as, well, as *literature,* this was in fact quite rare. In most of the popular and high-powered panels, both the traditional idea of literature and the concept of literary quality, insofar as they came up at all, were dismissed as "naïve," "elitist," "hegemonic," etc., etc. The chief substitutes for literature on display at this year's MLA were Marxism, feminism, what we might call homosexualism, "cultural studies," ethnic studies, and any of a number of indeterminate mixtures of the above leavened with dollops of deconstructivist or poststructuralist theory—in other words, multiculturalism *de luxe.*

There was, for example session number 40, "Revolting Acts: Gay Performance in the Sixties," in which one could hear Michael Moon from Duke University, that veritable Hippocrene of political correctness, wax rhapsodic over Andy Warhol's "truly dangerously experimental" relationship with Valerie Solanas, the woman who shot Warhol in 1968. The same session—which like many of the panels devoted to homosexual themes was wildly overcrowded—offered us Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Professor Moon's colleague at Duke, on the subject of "Gay Vanguardism." Professor Sedgwick spoke in glowing terms about the liberation movements of Sixties—she mentioned in particular movements on behalf of peace, mental patients, prisoners, and children—and expressed an interest in exploring "the pedagogical pederastic model" and in "denaturalizing or destabilizing gender assignment."

Then there was session 692, arranged by the Marxist Literary Group, devoted to "Gender, Race, and 'Othering' in the Narrative Arts." This panel was not, however, to be confused with number 26 "The Poetics of 'Othering': Gender, Class, and Cultural Identity in the Literature of Africa and its Diaspora," or with number 588, "Reinventing Gender." Other attractive sessions included number 62, "The Other Captives: American Indian Oral Captivity Narratives," and number 590, "The Ties that Bound: Homophobia and Relations among Males in Early America," in which one could hear papers on "Sodomy in the New World," "The Prurient Origins of the American Self," "New English Sodom," and "The Sodomitical Tourist." As far as I know, none of the sessions was X-rated.

John Milton, as I mentioned, got off rather lightly in the session devoted to his work that I attended. Not so poor Shakespeare. Session number 356, "Tactical Shakespeare: Resistance and the Economy of the Early Modern Subject," included a paper on "Early Modern Characters and Postmodern Subjects: Counterhegemonic Discourse in the *Comedy of Errors* and *The Winter's Tale*"—not exactly the kind of thing to increase the Bard's readership, one would have thought. And then there was session number 158, which was devoted to "Women's Responses to Shakespeare Today: Gender, Race, and Colonialism": precisely the subjects, of course, that leap to mind when one thinks of Shakespeare. In fact, Shakespeare's work was not really the issue here at all. "Miranda's Canadian Metamorphoses: A Study in Postcolonial Resistance" and "The Racial Politics of Intertextuality: Gloria Naylor's Deconstruction of Shakespeare" dealt with some contemporary fiction based loosely on Shakespearean themes, while "Contemporary Indian Uses of Shakespeare: Issues of Gender and Race" dealt with the mesmerizing influence *Hamlet* has had on a certain Indian village. True, we heard about the "patriarchal bias of Shakespeare's tragedy," Miranda's "white liberal guilt," and Caliban's status as an oppressed Third World victim of white, patriarchal, imperialism; but none of that was particularly new.

In "Canon Revision and the Question of Shakespeare's Status," another contribution to "Women's Responses to Shakespeare

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Today," Peter B. Erikson from the Clark Art Institute provided the audience with a passionate brief for multiculturalism. While he wound up recommending that Shakespeare's status be downgraded (a process he referred to as the "unfetishizing of Shakespeare"), his main text was not Shakespeare but "The Storm Over the University," a recent essay by the Berkeley philosopher John Searle that appeared in *The New York Review of Books* last November. Since my book *Tenured Radicals* was the subject of a good part of Professor Searle's essay, I feel confident disputing Professor Erikson's claim that "[Searle's] treatment of Roger Kimball's articulation of *The New Criterion*'s vision is accommodating if not cozy."

In fact, Professor Searle was sharply critical of *Tenured Radicals* on several counts. But he also dared both to criticize some of the academy's reigning idols and—what was perhaps even more unforgivable—to refuse to declare himself a wholehearted champion of multiculturalism. Instead, he articulated what Professor Erikson accurately called a "sophisticated" version of the "traditionalist position." That is, while he gladly acknowledged that the canon could and should change over time, he continued to endorse the idea that the work of some writers—Shakespeare, for example—is "of very high intellectual and artistic quality, to the point of being of universal human interest."

The thought that *anything* could be of "universal human interest" is one thing a card-carrying multiculturalist like Professor Erikson simply cannot abide. And indeed his often confused arguments about the "intellectual deficiencies" in what he took to be Professor Searle's "traditionalist model" turned mostly on Professor Erikson's commitment to "identity politics" and the idea of "cultural difference" as opposed to "universalism." When he reads a work by a black woman author, he explained, "I do not enter into a transcendent human interaction but instead become more aware of my whiteness and maleness, social categories that shape my being." In other words, he repudiates precisely that quality which makes literature so valuable: its ability to speak to us *across* the barriers of time, geography, social system, religious belief, to say nothing of the currently favored barriers of sex, class, race, and ethnic origin. "Transcendent," like "universalist," is a naughty word for the politically correct multiculturalist largely because, if taken seriously, it suggests that the qualities that unite us as human beings are more important than the contingencies that separate us as social and political agents.

Citing ridiculous or repellent titles from academic conferences is a journalistic occupation that irritates politically correct academics almost as much as calling them politically correct. Several speakers took time out to sneer at "the media's" reporting on the phenomenon of political correctness: after all, who are these journalists if not middle-class hegemonists still beholden to the accommodationist politics of a universalist model of pluralism that is insufficiently blah, blah, blah. In only one of the more than a dozen sessions that I visited was there no mention of the subject. I believe that the MLA may have to be credited with spawning a new sub-variety of political correctness that consists in subscribing to all the politically correct pieties while loudly denying that such a thing exists. On the subject of titles, the issue is simply this: either they mean something or they don't. If they're meaningless, they're superfluous, an insult to one's audience, and oughtn't to have been used in the first place; if they *do* mean something, then they are naturally to be taken as a clue to the subject of the paper or the session they announce and are legitimately open to comment and criticism. After all, if a title is deliberately provocative, its author can hardly blame people for being provoked.

Which brings us to "Lesbianism, Heterosexuality, and Feminist Theory," an extremely popular session presided over by Biddy Martin from Cornell University. The papers presented in this session, especially the second—"The Lesbian Phallus: Or, Does Heterosexuality Exist?"—were criticized and ridiculed as soon as the program

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

for the MLA convention was published. Was this fair? Given the topic and the paper titles—the other two were "Mapping the Frontier of the Black Hole: Toward a Black Feminist Theory" and "Perverse Desire, the Lure of the Mannish Lesbian"—I think we can be sure that the assembled scholars were not there to discuss *Little Women*.

The "black hole" contributor was Sue E. Hutchins from Scripps College, where she teaches English and Black Studies and Women's Studies and Religion. She used the metaphor of the black hole to describe "black lesbians' profound exclusion from dominant discourse." If, she explained, white heterosexual women can be said to occupy the "center" of "cultural space" and black heterosexual women the margins, then black lesbians belong to the margin of the margins: hence, you see, the black hole. But all this, together with such ritual assertions as "black women loving black women is a revolutionary act," was merely a kind of throat-clearing for Professor Hutchins's real subject: the quest for a black lesbian in Africa. "Is there," she asked, "an individual who is both indigenous to the continent and who is a lesbian?"—that is, in case we didn't get it, "a lesbian in the conservative and severely literal Catharine Stimpson [2] sense of the word: a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying."

Professor Hutchins's problem, of course, is that lesbianism is deeply frowned upon and exceedingly rare in black Africa. She tries to help herself out of this difficulty by announcing that she's willing to make do with a black African lesbian "in representation"—i.e., in fiction or myth—as well as "corporeally." And apparently she did finally dig up some anthropological evidence of African lesbian sexuality "in the Stimpson sense." Even so, it seems that the pickings were disappointingly slim. Professor Hutchins's response to her findings was revealing. It tells us, among much else, a good deal about our multiculturalists's habits of interpretation and how we should judge their use of evidence. Professor Hutchins solemnly informs us that her effort "is an attempt to show sensitivity to the text and the culture that produces it"—"I am suing for permission to read," she adds in a gratuitous gesture toward victimhood. But what does Professor Hutchins do when faced with a dearth of black African lesbians? As she explained in one dramatic moment: "I either 'out' an author or I 'out' a character (it takes one to know one, you know), or . . . I 'out' language." In other words, she shows "sensitivity to the text and the culture that produces it" by inventing lesbian characters where there are none.

That brings us to Judith Butler's paper on the "lesbian phallus" and the question of the existence of heterosexuality. I regret to say that Professor Butler, who teaches in the Humanities Center at Johns Hopkins University, was a bit of a let-down on both subjects. Her main point, at which she arrived after a tortuous Lacanian reading of Freud's 1914 essay on narcissism, was that "erotogenicity" was not the privileged property of the genitals—and most especially not the male genitals—but was essentially "plastic" and "transferable." Voicing her "wariness with repsect to the phallic ideal," she explained that her "task is not merely to disjoin the phallus [i.e., an idealized source of erotic gratification] from the penis but to underscore the phallus as transferable property." "The phallus," she concluded, is "always already plastic." About the question of the existence of heterosexuality, she merely professed to having "lost interest along the way."

What was most interesting about Professor Butler's paper was not her conclusions—these were an expected smorgasbord of politically correct attitudes current in radical lesbian feminism—but the sophistication of her arguments. It was clear that Professor Butler is gifted with an keen and methodical philosophical mind. While her presentation was needlessly prolix and her conclusions debatable, to say the least, hers was the most rigorously argued paper I heard at the MLA. One could not help but lament the fact

2 That is, Catharine R. Stimpson, the outgoing president of the MLA.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

that these gifts are wasted pondering such subjects as "the lesbian phallus."

Professor Butler concluded her talk by making the politically correct gesture of announcing that she was not politically correct, criticizing what she described as the "current conservative media blitz," and deploring "homophobic discourse on AIDS." Now "homophobia"—that is, fear or dislike or intolerance of homosexuals—has recently joined the pantheon of things it is politically incorrect to seem to be. (Whether one actually *is* racist or sexist or homophobic is in some ways a secondary matter.) Because I have cited and skeptically described some of the panels at the MLA devoted to homosexual themes, I will doubtless be accused of being "homophobic." But then it is precisely on the subjects that are most difficult to debate in public—like race or homosexuality—that the demand for political correctness exercises its greatest tyranny: there is one politically correct position and then there is everything else. In any event, it is important to stress that the issue raised by these panels has nothing to do with "homophobia." It has to do first of all with the kinds of things that are appropriate subjects for a public scholarly discussion of literature. I submit that neither "The Sodomitical Tourist" nor "The Lesbian Phallus" is appropriate. This is not because I suffer from "homophobia" but because I believe that the chief attraction of such topics is prurient. Panels devoted to homosexual themes often have the air of rallies for the initiate; "sexual orientation"—like race, ethnic origin, and so on in other contexts—is deliberately politicized and hailed as another mark of cultural "difference" that renders "universality" or "transcendence" impossible.

The more general issue, however, concerns the glorified place that has been alotted to sexuality and questions of "sexual orientation" in the humanities. Why should the details of one's sexual interests—hetero-, homo-, or otherwise—be featured in panels and classes supposedly devoted to the study of literature? And of course mention of "literature" reminds us how far academic panels devoted to homosexual themes tend to stray from any concern with literature. They are hardly alone in this. The whole tendency of the multiculturalist imperative that has invaded the study of literature is to politicize teaching and scholarship from the ground up. The effect is not to make one more politically "sensitive" but to transform a concern with literature into an obsession with one's race, one's sex, one's sexual preferences, one's ethnic origin. What one gains is a political cause; what one loses is the freedom of disinterested appreciation.

Indeed, the substitution of certain political causes for disinterested appreciation may be said to have become the raison d'être of the Modern Language Association. In the session on "Ideology and/in the Teaching of Literature," for example, one could hear Ellen Rooney, who was recently granted tenure at Brown University, deliver a paper called "Assume the Position: Pluralist Ideology and Gynocriticism." Professor Rooney argued strenuously against the traditional idea that literature was "an object that we recognize and respond to in some immediate way," explaining that the attempt to separate ideology from literature was itself a misguided ideological effort. She also explained that pluralism—an ideal that, as she correctly noted, "imagines a universal community"—was a bad thing because it "excludes exclusion" and because it attempts to distinguish between "ideology and reading."

Then there was the session on anthologies of American literature. Here one could listen to Paul Lauter, chief editor of the multiculturalist potpourri known as *The Heath Anthology of American Literature,* natter on about Reaganism, social inequality, and other "literary" topics. In case one hadn't already guessed, Professor Lauter explained how the impetus for the anthology was "directly linked" to the "movement for social change" of the Sixties. One might, he admits, wonder whether the editors of *The Heath Anthology* were "attempting to reconstitute the shape of our discipline—of higher education generally—on the basis of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

political as distinct from traditionally accepted aesthetic standards." Answer: "Of course we are. For I know of no standard of judgment . . . which transcends the particularities of time and place . . . . of politics in short." It was not so long ago that the inability to distinguish between aesthetic judgment and political propagandizing would have disqualified someone from teaching. Nowadays, the inability to make such distinctions is taken as a sign of superior insight.

Blatantly reductive as Professor Lauter was, the MLA's annual award for political fantasy must go to the session entitled "After Glasnost: Whither Marxist Criticism?", one of many panels devoted to Marxist or Marxist-inspired themes. It would be difficult to imagine a more graphic illustration of how politically correct thinking effectively inoculates its adherents against anything so inconvenient as historical reality. Sitting among the hundred or so auditors assembled to discover the fate of contemporary Marxist criticism, one might have been forgiven for believing that the year was 1969—if not, indeed, 1935. The session began with Neil Larsen from Northeastern University, who spoke about "Negation of the Abnegation: Dialectical Criticism in the 1990s." Western Marxism, he told us, has recently become "noncommittal and perplexed" about the class struggle and has taken refuge in theoretical and cultural disputes instead of forging ahead with revolutionary fervor. Take the well-known British Marxist Terry Eagleton: according to Professor Larsen, the problem is that Professor Eagleton "draws back from the prospect of actively and consciously impelling these contradictions [of power in society] toward a revolutionary outcome." Moreover, it was "blindness to socialist class struggle" that recently provided openings for "neo-capitalist interests"—that is, for what most us would call democracy—in Eastern Europe. This was very bad. The disintegration of Communism—what Professor Larsen called "socialist institutions"—in Eastern Europe has replicated "the worst mechanical and non-dialectical aspects of its socialist other."

The one novelty in Professor Larsen's paper was his insinuation that contemporary Marxist theory was guilty of "vulgar Marxism." Remember "vulgar Marxism"? That was the straw man that some Marxists invented when they wanted to castigate other Marxists for being insufficiently sophisticated. Vulgar Marxists believed that culture (the "superstructure") was a direct reflection of economic relations (the "base"). Sophisticated Marxists were not so naïve. They had read the writings of the Frankfurt School. They knew that the relation between culture and the productive forces of a society was a complicated affair. They still believed—"finally," "ultimately"—in economic determinism, but they were too cautious to say so outright. The determinism they believed in was "mediated." It was "dialectical." For the Sophisticated Marxist (a category that for our purposes may be said to consist largely of those who identify themselves as Marxists and who possess a Ph.D.) being "dialectical" is a little like what the adolescent mind sums up in the adjective "cool." It is good to be as dialectical as possible. Lenin was dialectical; Stalin (mostly) was not. Marx of course was highly dialectical. Being a member of the bourgeoisie is by definition undialectical —unless one happens to be a Sophisticated Marxist engaged in that paradigmatically bourgeois activity, teaching at a university, in which case one may be eligible for an exemption. How very dialectical, then, that Professor Larsen should suggest that the likes of Terry Eagleton and even that nonpareil of Sophisticated Marxists, the Duke professor Fredric Jameson, were in some deep dialectical sense insufficiently . . . dialectical and guilty, yes, of vulgar Marxism.

There was something almost quaint about Professor Larsen's paper. He loved talking about things like the relation between "base" and "superstructure," "Lenin's key dialectical insight" and "the internal contradictions of capitalism." He even appeared to believe that such exploded clichés *meant* something, much as scientists of an earlier era genuinely believed in such hypothetical entities as phlogiston or ether.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Less quaint, and considerably more fantastic, was the following presentation on the subject of the "construction of class in contemporary neo-Marxist theory" by Barbara Clare Foley from Rutgers University at Newark. It appears that Professor Foley is among those who admire Stalin and perhaps even consider him appropriately "dialectical." As she promised at the beginning of her talk, Professor Foley did not say much that was relevant to anyone's work as a literary scholar. Instead, she began by ridiculing the way Western "TV pundits" have presented the disintegration of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. These misguided commentators, she observed with biting sarcasm, believe that

> socialism—sometimes called Communism—has failed. First, because it did not recognize that the free market accords with human nature much better than a planned economy [an observation that was met by laughter and applause from the audience]; and second, because political pluralism as embodied in Western-style electoral politics makes for far more genuine mass political participation than does a one-party state.

One marveled to hear this middle-class beneficiary of a free-market economy and Western political pluralism—and a graduate of Radcliffe and the University of Chicago to boot—go on to argue that the movement toward "repressive state socialism became irreversible only in the Khrushchev-era in the USSR and only after the defeat of the Cultural Revolution in China." Perhaps neither Stalin nor Mao were sufficiently repressive for Professor Foley's taste. In any event, in her view "Twentieth-century Communist-led movements" represent "the greatest advance in history toward human emancipation." Whatever mistakes or excesses may have been committed along the way, the efforts to establish Communism in this century have been, she insisted, "mainly good" from the point of view of the working class and its "allies." (Tell that to the Ukrainians and the Chinese peasants.)

Professor Foley was not without a long list of particulars. For example, we were told that in the United States the movements for racial justice and unionization were spearheaded "by reds in the 1930s." President Roosevelt, you see, instituted his New Deal programs only because he feared a Communist revolution. Furthermore—still dilating on the glorious record of Communism in this century and correcting the history books along the way—Professor Foley informed us that the Nazis were defeated "primarily by the Soviets." It's not clear what she thought generals Eisenhower, Patton, and Bradley and Field Marshall Montgomery were doing in 1944 and 1945. Nor did she dwell on the warm alliance between Stalin and Hitler that persisted until the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. Rather, she proceeded to remind us that the Soviets have also been in the vanguard of human emancipation by aiding and abetting "dozens of post-War national liberation movements"—you know, the movements that have led to all those beneficent regimes in Africa, Cuba, Central America, and the Middle East.

Professor Foley wasn't done yet. Among the truly magnificent accomplishments of Communism in this century, she said, were the Soviet Five Year Plan, the Chinese Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. All were said to

> attest to the uncoerced [!] enthusiasm with which masses of workers and peasants have thrown themselves into the process of materially constructing a new infrastructure that they thought they would control . . . [and] to the dramatic transformation in human relationships and values that were enabled by the movement toward egalitarianism.

As examples of this miraculous transformation, Professor Foley described scenes of peasant women "making bonfires of their veils" and "Moscow bus riders performing citizen's arrests of fellow Russians who voiced racist insults to visiting black Americans." Of course, a more thorough "transformation in human relationships and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

values" was achieved by the nine to twelve *million* victims of Stalin's first Five Year Plan from 1928 to 1933, to say nothing of the three million or so who perished in his Great Purge of the preceding years, the millions who disappeared into the Gulag, or still other millions who died in his subsequent experiments with a "one-party state." Mao's efforts at totalitarian social engineering met with a similar success. But these were incidents that Professor Foley did not have occasion to mention. For her, the problem was that the noble movements toward human freedom and an "egalitarian society" represented by Communism had been "arrested and reversed" by the imperialistic forces of the West. It is consoling, is it not, to know that literature students at Rutgers University, Newark, are in such responsible hands?

After Barbara Foley's performance, almost anything might have seemed tame. But in some respects, Catharine Stimpson's Presidential Address epitomized to perfection the coy but thoroughly politicized spirit that now pervades the MLA and indeed the profession generally. In its breathtaking exhibition of politically correct attitudes, it managed to touch gently upon nearly every piety dear to the contemporary academic humanist while at the same time displaying appropriate contempt for a stunning array of "incorrect" opinions. Anyone who has seen Professor Stimpson in action knows that, while possessing a limited repertoire, she is an exceptionally able orator. Her most histrionically effective role is as defender of wounded virtue. She has also mastered the art of speaking almost entirely in clichés. This means that, unless one is paying close attention, she will often seem merely to be defending the status quo when in fact she is proposing radical change.

Professor Stimpson managed to add noticeably to the heady atmosphere of political rectitude wafting about the Hyatt Regency before even beginning her address by the simple device of dedicating it to colleagues "who have met AIDS with exemplary rage and gallantry and courage." This gesture elicited somber, heartfelt applause. Everyone knows that AIDS is a horrible disease. But not all horrible diseases manage to transform themselves into signs of political election. AIDS has done so primarily because of the activism it has fostered among homosexuals. Many, many more people die each year from breast cancer, from heart attacks, and from other diseases than die from AIDS. But only AIDS enjoys the privileged status of being politically correct. Thus it is that AIDS is widely invoked as a token of political orthodoxy. For example, Martha Nussbaum, a professor of philosophy at Brown, noted not once but twice in her recent collection of essays that she was donating a portion of the royalties she received from the book to "The AIDS Action Committee of Boston." Now what are the royalties on a book of academic philosophical essays likely to be? $37.50? $78.95? The ritual invocation of AIDS is a superb example of the politically correct gesture: it costs nothing yet nonetheless imparts a warm glow of superior virtue.

While she took time out to lambast the notion of political correctness and the way it had been used to criticize the MLA, Professor Stimpson devoted the body of her talk to the quintessential politically correct idea of 1991: "difference." Along the way she managed to get in praise for Václav Havel and several other exquisitely PC figures and themes. At one point, for example, she paused solemnly to note that were limits to what even the most socially concerned literary criticism could do: "a hungry child cannot eat our words, and a battered woman cannot tape her broken ribs with our interpretations," as if hungry children or battered women were the issue. Describing the study of modern literature as a "drama of difference," an effort to teach us to live "openly with difference," she devoted most of her address to contrasting the traditional view of the humanities unfavorably to multiculturalism, "cultural democracy," and their supporting ideologies. The former is elitist, hierarchical, and insufficiently sensitive to differences like "age, class, ethnicity, institution, gender, nation,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tribe, race, rank, religion, sexuality," while the latter involve "treating society as the home of several equally valuable but distinct racial and ethnic groups," as she put it in one anodyne phrase.

Professor Stimpson acknowledged that not everyone in her flock was so enthusiastic about the prospect of multiculturalism "invigorating" the study of literature. She therefore proclaimed herself "baffled, baffled as to why we cannot be students of Western culture and multiculturalism at the same time." What she did not say, of course, was that multiculturalism implied a complete politicization of teaching and learning, that its radically egalitarian conception of culture ruled out not only the idea of literary quality but downgraded the very idea of literature as a distinct realm of endeavor and experience; she did not mention that multiculturalism, far from being a means of securing ethnic and racial equality, was an instrument for promoting ideological separatism based on all those differences she enjoyed enumerating: "age, class, ethnicity, institution, gender, nation, tribe, race, rank, religion, sexuality"; she did not dwell on the fact that the multiculturalist imperative explicitly denies the intellectual and moral foundations of Western culture —preeminently its commitment to rationality and the ideal of objectivity—and that consequently the idea of being "students of Western culture and multiculturalism at the same time" is either an empty rhetorical gesture or a contradiction in terms.

As it happens, one prominent focus of Professor Stimpson's attack was the passage from the inaugural issue of *The New Criterion* that serves as the epigraph for this essay. She read most of it aloud, suggesting that it represents a prime instance of the "booming rhetorical guns" under which the MLA has suffered so unfairly. Consider: "[M]ost of what is written . . . is either hopelessly ignorant, deliberately obscurantist, commercially compromised, or politically motivated." Could it be that the academy, that the MLA, is guilty of such things as deliberate obscurantism or politicizing the study of literature? "[T]he very notion of an independent high culture and the distinctions that separate it from popular culture and commercial entertainment have been radically eroded." Would anyone in the academy today really challenge the distinction between high culture and popular entertainment? "This fateful collapse in critical standards . . . and in the very idea of critical disinterestedness . . . has changed, and changed very much for the worse, the way the arts and humanities are now studied in our universities." Surely there was nothing at the MLA to suggest that academic standards had suffered or that well-known scholars have jettisoned the ideal of critical disinterestedness? And as for "the radical movement of the Sixties," well, Professor Stimpson called them her "salad days," Professors Lauter, Foley, and Larsen seem still to be living them, but who would say that the academy was influenced for the worse by a Sixties radicalism—by drugs, promiscuity, a destruction of academic standards, an importation of politics into the classroom?

Professor Stimpson presents herself as the champion of the downtrodden and disempowered. Yet the multiculturalist conception of education she champions would bring not victory but profound defeat for genuine intellectual emancipation. In a recent essay entitled "Our Universal Civilization," the novelist V. S. Naipaul described his vocation as a writer as a journey from the periphery to the center: from his native Trinidad—the periphery of universal civilization—to London, its center. All true education traces some such movement from the periphery to the center, from our isolated selves to something larger. The multiculturalist imperative holds that there is no center, only a series of equally valid peripheries. As the 106th annual meeting of the MLA showed in unsettling detail, this doctrine has established itself as the reigning orthodoxy in literature departments in colleges and universities across the country. It is an insidious doctrine, spelling new forms of intellectual and moral separatism, and it is a tragedy that it should have found so warm a reception in the American academy.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Sylvia Plath and the poetry of confession

by Bruce Bawer

Back when America was careening from the Eisenhower era—the "tranquillized Fifties," as Robert Lowell called them—toward the Age of Aquarius, American poetry was undergoing a dramatic shift as well. A period of highly controlled, formal, and impersonal poetry, dominated by the likes of Richard Wilbur and Anthony Hecht, gave way with surprising rapidity to one of unrestrained, exceedingly personal free verse, often about extreme emotional states, by such poets as John Berryman, Anne Sexton, and W. D. Snodgrass. So revolutionary did these effusions seem at the time that the critic M. L. Rosenthal found it necessary, in a review of Lowell's 1959 volume *Life Studies*, to coin a new name for them: confessional poetry. To be sure, although the confessionalists tended to be more explicit about their divorces, orgasms, and such than poets of earlier generations, there was nothing fundamentally new about verse that took the poet's private life and feelings for its material; accordingly, though Rosenthal's term gained widespread currency, there were from the beginning those who objected to it as unnecessary and even denigrating, and who maintained that to label a poem in this fashion was to draw inordinate attention to its often sensational subject matter and thereby to slight its literary merit.

Of course, the literary merit of confessional poetry varied widely; and perhaps the most unfortunate effect of the term's broad acceptance was that, in the years after *Life Studies*, many a poet and critic began thinking of confessionalism as something that aspired not to aesthetic excellence so much as to the total honesty of the psychiatrist's couch or—well—the church confessional, and that should therefore be judged by the degree not of its artistry but of its candor. What was lost sight of, by many, was that for such poetry to be of literary importance it must, through a concentration not on universals but on intimate particulars, awaken in all sorts of readers (whose lives might, needless to say, be extremely different from the poet's in those intimate particulars) a sense of common humanity, a mature recognition that the essentials of one life are the essentials of all. If bad confessional poetry, in other words, appeals to a reader superficially, soliciting his attention and empathy on the basis of shared background or politics or neuroses or sexual tastes—or, alternatively, taking him out of himself in much the same way as a lurid, gossipy supermarket tabloid—the best confessional poetry introduces him to individuals with whose social lives and ideas he might not identify at all, but whose personal testimony nonetheless manages somehow to draw him inward. Like the poetry of Wilbur and Hecht, moreover, the best confessional poetry is marked by balance, control, a sense of form and rhythm, and even a degree of detachment.

Though, of all the confessional poets, Robert Lowell earned the most substantial literary reputation, it was Sylvia Plath who, in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the years following the posthumous publication of her second poetry collection, *Ariel* (1965), became the movement's chief icon. Yet while Lowell's fame needs no more explanation than the aesthetic merit of his work, Plath's quick rise to near-legendary status owes much to other factors. For one thing, Plath's notion of herself as a victim of two domineering men—her father, who died when she was a child, and her husband, the poet Ted Hughes, from whom she was separated at the time of her suicide in London in 1963—made her extremely useful to the women's movement. (Perhaps no one has more memorably expressed the feminist position on Plath than Robin Morgan, who in a poem entitled "Arraignment" accuses Hughes of Plath's murder and envisions a group of women entering his home, "disarm[ing] him of that weapon with which he tortured us, / stuff[ing] it into his mouth, sew[ing] up his poetasting lips around it, / and blow[ing] out his brains.") Meanwhile, Plath's proudly flaunted self-destructiveness, and her romantic image of herself as a sensitive genius in a brutal and indifferent world, made her a natural idol for many a young person in the throes of adolescent torment. (What, after all, could be more irresistible to a saturnine, self-romanticizing teenager than a passage like this, from Plath's college journal: "nothing is real, past or future, when you are alone in your room with the clock ticking loudly into the false cheerful brilliance of the electric light. And if you have no past or future, which, after all, is all that the present is made of, why then you may as well dispose of the empty shell of present and commit suicide.") I think it is safe to say that these two groups account for the majority of Plath's devotees and that neither group cherishes her work chiefly for its literary merit.

For such readers, patently, the real interest lies not in Plath's art but in her life. And her life—from her childhood in Jamaica Plain, Winthrop, and Wellesley, Massachusetts, through her undergraduate career at Smith and two Fulbright years at Cambridge, to marriage, motherhood in Devon and London, the beginnings of literary prominence, marital estrangement, and self-slaughter at thirty—*is* fascinating, though not on the superficial level that such readers tend to focus upon. It is fascinating, rather, as a study in the nexus among art, ambition, and abnormal psychology, and, more specifically, in the formation of an author whose most anguished poems, composed only weeks before her suicide, are widely considered to be the quintessence of confessional poetry. The story of this formation must begin with Plath's parents, Otto Emil Plath, an authoritarian, German-born entomology professor, and his submissive wife, Aurelia, a second-generation Austrian-American. Both parents shared a belief in discipline, a disinclination to make (or to allow their children to make) close friends, and—in the words of Anne Stevenson, author of the biography *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989)—a "veneration for work";[1] together, they raised an obedient, overachieving daughter who found security (or, at least, a semblance thereof) in the structures and schedules of the classroom and whose sense of self-definition appears to have depended from an early age upon her ability not only to meet but to exceed the expectations of her parents and teachers. Otto's death when Sylvia was eight years old (she insisted, the next day, on going to school) led to a lifetime of largely suppressed rage at him, both for being a tyrant—which he may or may not have been, depending upon how one defines the word—and for abandoning her, and led also to a lifetime of tireless effort to surpass the goals set for her by the authority figures she erected in his place.

To be sure, as long as she was a student, Sylvia functioned splendidly—or seemed to. At twenty, invoking an image that later provided the title for her autobiographical novel, she would write to a friend that "I've

1 *Bitter Fame* is published by Houghton Mifflin at $19.95. The other biographies of Sylvia Plath mentioned in this piece are available in paperback: Edward Butscher's from Pocket Books at $9.95, and Linda Wagner-Martin's from St. Martin's at $12.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gone around for most of my life as in the rarefied atmosphere under a bell-jar, all according to schedule, four college years neatly quartered out in seasons." But the daughter of Otto Plath needed that bell-jar, needed the structure provided by school and college, needed her mother and teachers to set goals for her. If, as she admitted, she suffered from a "terrifying fear of mediocrity," it was because anything less than first-rate work might shatter her fragile sense of self; and if, furthermore, she referred to a college boyfriend as her "major man," one suspects that it was because she was unable to understand anything in life—whether it was dating, marriage, or the making of a literary career—except by analogy with schoolwork, choosing friends as if they were honors courses and competing for beaux as if they were class prizes.

Peter Davison, who met Plath when she was a star undergraduate at Smith, wrote later that she was "always trying to create an effect, to make an impression," and that she talked about her own life "as though she were describing a stranger to herself, a highly trained circus horse." Which, in a way, she was: for she would jump through almost any hoop to please those in authority. The vapid prototypes established by others formed the foundation of her identity: she embraced the role of All-Around Coed, for instance, with an inane fervor astonishing in one so intelligent ("I still can't believe I'm a SMITH GIRL!" she wrote her mother soon after entering college). She would stop at little to win academic distinction: friends complained of her manipulativeness, of how she used people to get ahead and discarded them callously when they were no longer needed.

Even in literature, image ruled. Plath writes her mother about course possibilities at Smith: "Imagine saying, 'Oh, yes, I studied writing under Auden!'. . . Honestly, Mum, I could just cry with happiness." If many a bard before and since has longed to forge the uncreated conscience of his race, Plath, in journal entries about her poetic aspirations, takes the tone of a high-school climber angling for a graduation medal, noting that "I must get philosophy in [i.e., into her poetry]. Until I do so I shall lag behind A[drienne] C[ecile] R[ich]." Her willingness to bow to both literary and subliterary totems is exemplified by her habit (as noted by Stevenson) "of talking of Wallace Stevens in one breath and *Mademoiselle* in the next." Just as she deliberately wrote insipid stories at Smith to win approval from the editors of *Seventeen*, in later years she was equally desperate for the approbation of *The New Yorker*, whose first acceptance of a Plath poem occasioned an almost frighteningly rhapsodic journal entry.

Writing was always important to Plath. Her father had been an author—of, among other things, a textbook on bumblebees—and had used the family supper table as a writing desk. Stevenson, who has a sensitivity to the motives behind Plath's writing that seems to have eluded earlier biographers, highlights a memory of Mrs. Plath's. During Sylvia's early childhood, at times when her mother was attending to Sylvia's infant brother, Warren, and wanted to prevent her daughter from trying to draw attention away from the boy, she encouraged the little girl to read letters in newspapers. Stevenson's savvy comment: "even at two and a half her daughter was being urged to treat negative emotion (jealousy of her brother) with words." This was something that Plath would do throughout her life. For her, writing became a way of asserting herself, of combating her deficient sense of identity. "Haunted by a fear of her own disintegration," Stevenson notes, Plath "kept herself together by defining herself, writing constantly about herself, so that everyone could see her there, fighting and conquering an outside world that forever threatened her frail being." No wonder, then, that, as Edward Butscher observes in his 1976 biography *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, "getting published was not merely important [for Sylvia], it was everything": for her, seeing one's name in print was the ultimate proof not merely of acceptance but of existence.

The literary life, however, proved to differ so drastically from life at home, school, and col-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

lege that Sylvia's first excursion from familiar territory into the *terra incognita* of publishing was almost her last. During the summer of 1953, she went to New York as an undergraduate editorial intern for *Mademoiselle* —an experience that exposed her for the first time to a chaotic, equivocal adult world in which the first thing authority figures demanded of her was simply that she be herself. And being herself, alas, was one thing that Sylvia was not good at. Butscher quotes Plath's editor at *Mademoiselle* as saying that she had "never found anyone so unspontaneous so consistently. . . . [Sylvia was] all façade, too polite, too well-brought-up and well-disciplined." In any event, removed from the closed system of accomplishment and approval within which she had operated for so long, Plath became unstrung. Soon after returning home, she attempted suicide, and spent the next several months undergoing psychiatric treatment at McLean Hospital, which over the years would gain fame as the treatment center of choice for Plath's fellow confessionalists Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton. (The whole experience, of course, is retold in fictional form in her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*.)

What is one to make of this suicide attempt? Though they differ considerably in tone and emphasis, the interpretations of Plath's biographers are not as inconsistent as one might expect. Butscher's centers on the notion that Sylvia

> was three persons, three Sylvias in constant struggle with one another for domination: Sylvia the modest, bright, dutiful, hard-working, terribly efficient child of middle-class parents and strict Calvinist values who was grateful for the smallest favor; Sylvia the poet, the golden girl on campus who was destined for great things in the arts and glittered when she walked and talked; and Sylvia the bitch goddess, aching to go on a rampage of destruction against all those who possessed what she did not and who made her cater to their whims.

To complicate matters, Butscher speaks of additional, if secondary-level, Sylvias, whom he describes as "fitful shadows of the three main configurations." One was "Sylvia the sad little girl still hurting from the profound wound of her father's rejection and abandonment of her and wanting to crawl back into her mother's cave-safe womb"; another was "Sylvia the ordinary teenager who yearned for a kind husband, children, and a house like her grandmother's by the seashore."

Stevenson, for her part, settles for two Sylvias—a false outer self and a real inner self—and argues that the poet's self-destructiveness sprang from the yearning of her real self to kill her false self "so that her real one might burn free of it." This picture seems much simpler than Butscher's, but Stevenson also chooses to complicate things a bit by maintaining that

> Sylvia had long been confusing two very different battles within herself. One was with an artificial Sylvia, modeled on her mother, driven by ambitions she believed Aurelia harbored for her and ideas she thought Aurelia projected. This battle was occurring on a comparatively superficial level. Beneath it, so to speak, raged an altogether more serious war, where the "real" Sylvia—violent, subversive, moonstruck, terribly angry—fought for her existence against a nice, bright, gifted American girl. This "real" self may have been created, and gone underground, at the time of her father's death in November 1940. It had emerged in August 1953, before her suicide attempt, and it remained in charge during the months of her slow recovery at McLean. It would be too simple to say that the nice girl wanted to live while the vengeful, deserted daughter wanted to die. But it was probably the case that Sylvia's powerful buried self was deadly in its determination to emerge at any cost.

To a considerable extent, of course, there is no need to choose between Butscher's and Stevenson's formulations: they are largely two ways of looking at the same thing. Stevenson's "'real' self," for instance, despite the drastic difference in tone, is essentially equivalent to Butscher's "bitch goddess."

At McLean, Plath underwent shock treat-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ments and was told by her doctor that it was all right (a) to hate her parents and (b) to have sex. She claimed to have found all this liberating, and returned to Smith supposedly cured. (Certainly her success-oriented approach to literature returned, strong as ever. "Must get out SNAKE PIT," she confided to her journal in 1959, referring to Mary Jane Ward's bestseller. "There is an increasing market for mental hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive it, recreate it.") But Butscher and Stevenson both believe that McLean did her more harm than good. Butscher's view is that Plath's doctor "resurrected the mask [i.e., her good-girl façade] and gave it a firmer fit by letting Sylvia participate in the unearthing of the classic Electra complex." Stevenson focuses her attack not on the psychoanalysis but on the shock treatments, arguing that they critically weakened Plath's façade (which she, unlike Butscher, sees as protective and necessary). "It may be that she never really recovered" from the shock treatments, writes Stevenson, suggesting that they

> changed her personality permanently, stripping her of a psychological "skin" she could ill afford to lose. Attributable to her ECT is the unseen menace that haunts nearly everything she wrote, her conviction that the world, however benign in appearance, conceals dangerous animosity, directed particularly toward herself. Sylvia's psychotherapy almost certainly opened up the dimensions of her Freudian psychodrama, revealing the figure of her lost, "drowned" father . . . whose death she could neither forgive nor allow herself to forget; psychotherapy also intensified the presence of her much-loved yet ultimately resented mother, whose double she had to be, for reasons of guilt or ego weakness, and to whom she was tied by a psychic umbilicus too nourishing to sever.

Though the "Freudian psychodrama" is at the center of both interpretations, Butscher places more emphasis on Otto Plath, stating on his first page that Sylvia's "central obsession from the beginning to the end of her life and career was her father," and interpreting that life in terms of a "frustrated will to power." Stevenson, by contrast, insists that "[i]t is not clear how much of Sylvia Plath's existential anxiety can be traced to her social isolation as a girl and how much to her father's death." But it seems to me that both factors are important: if Plath hadn't been sequestered from other children, her father might not have been such a god to her and his death might therefore not have affected her so catastrophically.

Though their interpretations can be seen as largely consistent in their essentials, Plath's biographers differ dramatically in style, method, and perspective. Butscher's book is a mixed—and rather overstuffed—bag. Though he offers a number of perceptive observations and sensitive close readings, he includes countless extraneous details (providing, among much else, the dates on which the Bradford High School honor roll was released). As he demonstrated in his recent biography of Conrad Aiken, moreover, Butscher has an inordinate faith in the ultimate power of psychiatric nomenclature to illuminate anything and everything in the realm of human behavior; to his mind, one gathers, understanding an individual is almost entirely a matter of attaching labels like "neurotic" and "schizophrenic" to that individual's behavior. Butscher assigns these labels with an alarming alacrity and a wellnigh palpable relish, and, quite often, on what would appear to be the slightest of evidence. (A sentence about the mother of one of Plath's boyfriends begins: "Sylvia's dislike of Mrs. Willard, which she of course repressed. . . ." And: "Sylvia's attitude toward Davison himself remained distant, perhaps because of repressed guilt.") One comes away from Butscher's book thinking that there should be a psychological label to describe someone overly devoted to psychological labels. Linda Wagner-Martin, in *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987), has the opposite problem: she performs too little analysis, whether literary or psychological. She treats Plath's suicidal depression almost as if it were a phenomenon unrelated to the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poet's day-to-day psychology, and occasionally leaves the impression that she considers Plath to have been, most of the time, as sound of mind as anyone else—at least, that is, until Ted Hughes entered the picture in February 1956, barely more than two years after her suicide attempt.

It was Plath, then an exchange student in Cambridge, who engineered their meeting: one day she read some of his poems in a magazine—poems as intense and dark as she wanted hers to be, and *real* in a way hers were not—and decided immediately that she had to meet him. That same night, she introduced herself to him at a party, where (as she wrote in her journal) the tall, brooding, Lawrentian young Yorkshireman "kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hairband. . . . And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face." And so they were married. Hughes was the first man Plath had ever known to whom she could imagine subordinating herself without difficulty—as both poet *and* woman—in the way that her mother had subordinated herself to her father. Months later, she would write that Hughes "fills somehow that huge, sad hole I felt in having no father"; for the meantime, however, in letters divulging her new love to her kith and kin, Plath described him as "a violent Adam," "the only man in the world who is my match," "the strongest man in the world . . . with a voice like the thunder of God," "a breaker of things and of people." What more could a girl want?

It was after her marriage to Hughes that Plath began to write the poems that eventually appeared in her first collection, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960). In their intellectual and stylistic sophistication, they represent a significant advance over the unremarkable verse of earlier years (fifty examples of which are relegated to the appendix of her 1981 *Collected Poems*). Like their predecessors, however, all but a few of these *Colossus* poems read like descriptive exercises—and with good reason, for many of them *were* exercises, written to order for Hughes, who when Plath could not come up with anything to write about, would arbitrarily select some object, animal, or setting that was near at hand and assign her the task of composing a poem about it. Plath did her job competently, employing all the resources about which she had learned during her years of study. The metaphors and similes in these poems are often quite vivid (the cadavers in a dissecting room are "black as burnt turkey"), and her language frequently betrays the influence of some of the major poets of the day, notably Dylan Thomas. ("No doubt now in dream-propertied fall some moon-eyed, / Star-lucky sleight-of-hand man watched / My jilting lady squander coin, gold leaf stock ditches, / And the opulent air go studded with seed.") And an especially important influence is that of the early poems of Hughes himself, whose lean, grave, and austerely symbolic evocations of nature red in tooth and claw were in turn influenced both by his moor country upbringing and by his extensive reading in anthropology. To be sure, many of the harsh natural phenomena Plath observed in Devon and described in the *Colossus* poems did apparently move her deeply; Hughes, in an essay published after her death, notes that "[h]er reactions to hurts in other people and animals, and even tiny desecrations of plant-life, were extremely violent."

As a rule, however, Plath's *Colossus* poems seem more skillful than inspired. They are, as Anne Sexton commented, "all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that)." Though Hughes presumably tried to suggest topics that would tap Plath's profoundest emotions, almost everything in these verses strikes one as forced, from the intensifying adjectives and adverbs to the patterns of alliteration and assonance. Stevenson notes that as a student Plath, copying words from a thesaurus onto flash cards, had built poems "word by word, like novel, intricate structures"; reading the *Colossus* poems one can almost see her poring over her Roget's. The irony, of course, is that while the bleak, often

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

violent depictions of nature in many of these poems sincerely reflect Plath's own brittle sense of security in a brutal world—and though some of them plainly seek to draw on her complex, powerful emotions about her father's death—almost all of them have a labored quality, a manufactured intensity, their savage images striking one as overwrought and self-conscious, their ire and loathing coming across as false. Unlike Hughes's poems, moreover, the *Colossus* poems almost invariably fail to convey a personality, a point of view, let alone a passionate attachment to or understanding of the people, places, and things that they take as their subjects. Time and again, one feels that Plath is attempting to force greater significance upon scenes and situations than they really hold for her—to force it upon them, that is, rather than to discover it within them. While these poems, then, contain vivid images, striking lines, and pleasing configurations of sound, the poems don't work *qua* poems.

Not until 1960 did Plath begin to write the poems that would appear in *Ariel* (1965). The contrast with the most typical *Colossus* verses is remarkable: her new poems are colloquial, muscular, unafraid of repeated words or odd line lengths or the first person singular pronoun. In the best of them, such as "Tulips," she breathes some life into her descriptive skills, and yokes wit to feeling. The poems that are almost universally acknowledged as her strongest, however, and that more faithfully represent the characteristic style and tone of the book, are those like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy," in which, rather than try to turn homely objects and settings into objective correlatives for her emotions, she embraces wholeheartedly the idea of poem as subjective (and often highly surrealistic) effusion. So frequently praised and ubiquitously quoted are these two poems that it almost seems at times as if Plath's entire reputation rests upon them. There is, to be sure, good reason why these two perverse and passionate poems should receive special attention, because nowhere else in her verse does Plath more bluntly address her most fundamental psychological conflicts. In both poems, Otto Plath and Hughes figure prominently, as does Plath's suicide attempt at twenty. The speaker of "Lady Lazarus," indeed, brags darkly about her prowess at such attempts ("I do it so it feels real"), marvels at her survival of her attempt at age twenty (and of a near-fatal "accident" a decade earlier), and addresses an unnamed tormentor as "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy." She compares herself to an extermination-camp inmate, suggests that her victory over death makes her a "sort of walking miracle, my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade," and perceives that victory as securing for her a grotesque vengeance upon the opposite sex: "Beware / Beware. / Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air." Manifestly, we are meant to understand here that the speaker's experience with men (or with a certain man) was responsible in some way for her suicide attempt, and that her survival of it represents a miraculous triumph over them. "Daddy" draws on the same preoccupations and takes the same tone. Here the speaker refers to her father as a "black shoe" in which she has lived for thirty years and attributes her suicide attempt to a desire to "get back, back, back" to him. Spared death, she "made a model" of her father, a man with "a love of the rack and the screw," said "I do, I do," and lived with him for some time; but now she's murdered one man, in some sense, and by so doing has killed both: "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

These poems, along with the other most ferocious and famous poems in *Ariel*, flowed from Plath's pen in October and November of 1962, sometimes at the rate of more than one a day, soon after Hughes became involved with one Assia Wevill (who would become his second wife) and separated from Sylvia. Anne Sexton referred to these as "hate poems," and that they most certainly are, expressing time and again, in very similar terms, the most extreme and blatant of emotions, invariably aimed in the same direction. "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are the most

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

arresting of Plath's verses, and it is their hate, really, that makes them so—a hate communicated, often quite effectively, by way of natural language and rhythms, manically insistent repetitions and multiple rhymes, and sensational, often surrealistic images, all of which are designed to grab the attention of the most impassive reader. And grab the reader they do—on a first reading, anyway. In fact, this ability to capture the attention of readers—and even, at times, to shock them—helps explain why the *Ariel* poems, nearly three decades after Plath's death, remain a force to be reckoned with. And yet, what ultimately makes the poems memorable is less the hate that they express, or the blunt language that they employ, or even the inexcusable, hyperbolic metaphors that equate the poet's suffering with that of prisoners in Nazi concentration camps, than it is the fact that all these elements combine to convey, with vigor and directness, the extreme emotional state of a highly unbalanced, self-destructive woman.

It might be argued that there is a degree of aesthetic value in such an accomplishment. But the more one reads these poems, the more one realizes that beneath the thoroughly convincing representation of psychological disturbance—behind, that is, Plath's shrill, deranged voice—there is precious little human dimension. It has been argued that the *Ariel* poems are saved by their irony, but Plath's irony is facile and, moreover, always directed at others—never at the poet herself. She is capable of quipping sardonically, in "Lady Lazarus," "Do not think I underestimate your great concern"; but it doesn't occur to her, in her utter self-absorption, that her own dearth of concern for others might itself be a worthwhile target for irony. It is hardly an exaggeration, I think, to say that the chief problem with these poems is their constricting, claustrophobic solipsism. Compared to Plath, even Lowell—himself no tower of sanity or selflessness—seems quite actively involved with mankind, what with his numerous *Life Studies* poems about relatives, fellow poets, Czar Lepke, and the like; alongside Plath, even Berryman, with his often puerile attitude toward romantic relationships, comes off in the *The Dream Songs* as painting a nuanced, mature picture of love, sex, and marriage, and as providing, in his Henry persona, a model of proper authorial distance.

This is not to say that poems of self-scrutiny, as such, are necessarily bad, but rather to say that in the *Ariel* poems the self is so engrossed in itself that there appears to be little possibility of enlightenment, of discovery; to read them is to feel that their goal is not self-knowledge but self-display, a morbid absorption in and superficial celebration of the poet's own sensitivity and imagined victimhood. Throughout the poems, the world beyond the poet is seen consistently as despotic, destructive; yet she seems not to realize to what degree she is in fact her own destroyer, her own victim. The biographies of Plath make it clear that these poems are the work of a psychologically complicated and fascinating woman; but the poems themselves are, by comparison to the woman, woefully simple and—after the first reading—progressively less interesting.

In virtually every regard, then—in range of theme and invention, in complexity of feeling and structure, and in sophistication of style and technique—the *Ariel* poems are less impressive than the best so-called confessional poems of Lowell and Berryman. Certainly they are smaller in vision. Butscher quotes Irving Howe as complaining that "in none of the essays devoted to praising Sylvia Plath have I found a coherent statement as to the nature, let alone the value, of her vision." Butscher's reply is that "Sylvia did indeed have a vision: it was to plunge into the depths of self, the dark side of the mind's moon, and hope to touch the bottom of degradation and sorrow." Putting aside for the moment Butscher's mixed metaphor, what can one say about this defense? It can hardly be denied, of course, that the *Ariel* poems take such a plunge as Butscher describes. But is it correct, really, to say that they evince a "vision," in the sense that Howe plainly means? Yes, poems like "Daddy" and "Lady

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lazarus" pierce the poet's surface as sharply as a surgeon's knife; but the incisions are narrow, the innards unilluminated, the result (for the reader) not a laying bare of the intricate workings of a self and soul but a raw, lurid exhibition of private agony and bloodletting. To put it a bit differently, the *Ariel* poems provide a startlingly naked glimpse into the mind of a deeply disturbed woman; but a glimpse, however naked, is not necessarily the same as an insight, nor revelation necessarily the same as art.

Wagner-Martin would have us believe that the *Ariel* poems were a triumphant apotheosis—the inevitable consequence of Plath's rejection of Hughes's artificial little assignments and of her "com[ing] into her own as a woman"—and that Plath's suicide, which came soon after the completion of the poems, was essentially the result of Hughes's betrayal and withdrawal from her life. There is, however, nothing triumphant about the *Ariel* poems; far from reflecting a newly proud and independent womanhood, these poems, with their mad, unbridled hostility, plainly express the poet's sudden helplessness at the withdrawal of the protective canopy underneath which she had erected her entire life as wife, mother, and author. In Hughes, Plath had found a father-substitute, and his departure from her life served to release, after decades of suppression, an eight-year-old's exorbitant fear and fury at her father's death. Plath's sudden outpouring of thoroughly unfettered *Ariel* poems, in other words, represents less a breakthrough than a breakdown; for the poems show little sign of control over or understanding of her rage, let alone mature perception into the human complexities that produced it.

Nor can one blame Plath's suicide on Hughes. Her original attraction to him, after all, had much to do with his status as a "breaker of things and of people"; plainly, the self-destructive part of her had craved such a consort, and if he had never existed, she would have had to invent him. While in some sense, moreover, Hughes may indeed have failed Plath, in her mind the failure was doubtless her own: their marriage was, so to speak, a postgraduate honors course that she could not pass. For just as she had aimed for excellence in school and college, she had also set herself the goal of being an A-plus wife and mother; what she could not accept was that one cannot conduct one's personal life as if they gave prizes for it, any more than one can write serious fiction or poetry while aiming, above all, to please some editor, whether at *Mademoiselle* or *The New Yorker*.

If Wagner-Martin renders Plath's marriage as something of a feminist domestic tragedy—with Hughes as the villain—Stevenson seems eager to prove that, in W. S. Merwin's words, "there was something in Sylvia of a cat suspended over water, but it was not Ted who had put her there or kept her there." The sharp contrast between the views of Wagner-Martin and Stevenson in this matter is reflected in their respective prefaces: whereas Wagner-Martin claims, in her preface, that her unwillingness to alter her manuscript in accordance with demands by Olwyn Hughes (Ted Hughes's sister and Plath's literary executor) led to a denial of permission to quote at length from Plath's works, Stevenson thanks both Ted and Olwyn for all sorts of assistance (and, by the way, quotes extensively from the poems). Stevenson appears to go out of her way to catalogue Plath's offenses, especially against her husband (for instance, her rudeness to his humble Yorkshire mother), and to point out the various ways in which she considers him to have been a positive force in Plath's life. Some of the latter observations—for example, the argument that Hughes made the *Ariel* poems possible by persuading Plath "to be true to her gift rather than to her ambition"—seem valid. But Stevenson's tone is too often prosecutorial, and sometimes one feels as if she is doing little more than proffering a list of the Hughes camp's long-nursed grievances. Plath's *Ariel* poems, we are reminded, have caused great pain "to the innocent victims of her pen"; after Plath's separation from Hughes, her frequent reference to her lawyer's instructions "helped to make negotiations . . . difficult." To hear Stevenson tell it, Plath was always the one

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

making things "difficult": time and again, the biographer leaves the impression that Hughes was a perfectly balanced and responsible man dealing as honorably as he could with a demented woman. Perhaps most astonishing of all is Stevenson's implication that the attraction between Hughes and Assia might never have developed into an affair had Plath reacted less hysterically upon noticing it—that, in short, Plath, not Hughes, was responsible for his adultery. All this is most unfortunate, for, such matters aside, Stevenson's is by far the most intelligent and sensitive of the Plath biographies; until Hughes steps onstage, Stevenson's picture of Plath rings truer, on the whole, than anyone else's.

What did the poet herself make of *Ariel*? It is interesting to note that Plath—presumably sensing that the *Ariel* poems' crude, superficial confessionalism was a deficiency, while not knowing precisely how to mitigate it in presenting her verses to an audience—described "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" to A. Alvarez as "some light verse." Likewise, in an apparent attempt to put over the idea that the voice in these poems was not hers but rather that of an imaginary persona, she told an interviewer that "Daddy" had as its speaker a girl whose father was actually a Nazi and whose mother "very possibly [was] part Jewish." Such addenda, of course, if seriously accepted by a reader, rob a poem like "Daddy" of what force it has, a force that derives precisely from the speaker's mad, unreasoning hate; yet the fact that Plath felt compelled to describe the poem in this fashion suggests that, even though she was incapable of eliminating the poem's weakness, she was astute enough to recognize where that weakness lay. It is only to be hoped that, in the next century, such astuteness in regard to Plath's work will be less rare than it is today among poetry readers, and that future generations will be less inclined to confuse questions of aesthetic significance with those of political serviceability or personal idolatry.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Abstract Expressionism revisited

by Karen Wilkin

Not long ago, I was invited to lead a seminar on Abstract Expressionism at a well-regarded New York art school, part of a course on "contemporary ideas." The students were bright, articulate, and eager to talk—they even seemed to have done the assigned reading—but it was evident that they thought of Abstract Expressionism as a remote historical phenomenon, more or less the way they thought of Cubism. How much did these hip young aspiring artists know about what Clement Greenberg called "'American-type' painting," the new abstract art of the Forties and Fifties? Hard to say. The debate, still so lively and compelling in the early Sixties, when I was in school, between the followers of Harold Rosenberg, who claimed de Kooning as the paradigm, and the Greenberg camp, who looked to Pollock, came as a kind of revelation to the students of the Nineties. They were content to assume that Rosenberg's hectoring essay on "action painting"—part of the assigned reading, along with Greenberg's pieces on American-type painting and some of the American-type painters—was an adequate and accurate description of *everything* that went on all those years ago.

I pointed out that there was more to it than that and if they had been paying attention, they could have seen a fair amount of Abstract Expressionist work in New York in the past year. Admittedly, the rather overblown show at Gagosian Gallery last spring hadn't told us much about Pollock at his best—the selection of drawings was more informative—but the Hofmann retrospective at the Whitney was extremely enlightening. They had seen them, of course? A mixture of vigorous assent and noncommittal mutters. No matter. A group of current exhibitions could provide a fairly clear, if erratic view of some of the major figures—Willem de Kooning, Clyfford Still, and Adolph Gottlieb, among others. Notes were dutifully made. I hope they went. It could have been more of a revelation than anything we talked about.

For those of us old enough to think of Abstract Expressionism as something other than art history, this cluster of exhibitions offered something better than a revelation: a chance to think again about works we thought we knew or understood, with the perspective afforded by distance and a new context. The shows varied greatly in scope and ambition: Salander-O'Reilly mounted a carefully selected mini-retrospective of de Kooning, which was followed by a survey of his *Women* at Pace. The Metropolitan installed its complete holdings of Still for the first time—eleven paintings spanning his entire career, all but one the gift of the artist's wife in 1986—and Mary Boone offered a more circumscribed view of Still's paintings from the 1950s. At Knoedler we could see the late work of Gottlieb. Despite their disparate intentions, the cumulative effect of the shows was to bring an exciting moment in recent (well, fairly recent) American art vividly to life. Collectively, they reminded us

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of the high aspirations of the artists of that generation. The works attested to their faith in the eloquence of gesture, in the evocativeness of color, the seductiveness of surface —in short, their enduring belief in the importance and power of painting, independent of narrative, illustration, or overt rhetoric. (Abstract Expressionism generated its share of rhetoric, to be sure, some of the most pretentious spawned by the artists themselves, but they managed to keep it out of their art.) No flippancy or irony here, only hope of joining an honorable modernist tradition. What these artists shared was *plainly visible, but their individuality was* even more striking, for all their common assumptions about what art could be. Of course, Greenberg had warned us about this in 1955, in "'American-Type' Painting," noting that Abstract Expressionism only looks like a movement in relation to what other kinds of artists were doing. But if we had constructed theories about "typical" Abstract Expressionist painting, for the sake of convenience, the fortuitous correspondence of these fall shows made us think again.

The de Kooning exhibition was the most complete overview. With only one gap, it explored the full range of his evolution, from an excrutiatingly sensitive early portrait to the sad calligraphic paintings of the last few years, along with some fine drawings. The gap, alas, spanned what are arguably de Kooning's best paintings; too fragile to travel, the black-and-white abstractions of the 1940s, with their whiplash drawing, sliding planes, and mysterious shapes, were notably absent. Otherwise, the show was admirably chosen and illuminating.

At first sight, de Kooning (b. 1904) certainly looks like the archetypical New York painter of the period. At least from the late 1940s on, his paintings seem to embody Rosenberg's conception of "action painting," bearing witness as they do to their own history. A "signature" de Kooning often appears to be still in progress, momentarily arrested at an arbitrary stage in a series of attacks and counterattacks, so that a "finished" painting is a palimpsest of earlier stages and hints of mutations yet to come. Past, present, and future coexist in a single image. Possibilities are endless, mutability the only constant, made visible in the bleeds, drips, and runs of plane on plane, and the scrapes and wipes of excavation. Confronted by these pictures, Rosenberg's notion of the painter's working at fever pitch, pressed by emotional imperatives that override reason or judgment, seems almost plausible.

But the selection of works at Salander-O'Reilly suggested that something other than existential angst could have provoked *the worked, layered, "fought-through"* appearance of de Kooning's mature pictures. They are not necessarily what Stuart Davis called "seismographs of emotion," but elegantly and intelligently crafted, rather formal efforts. The drawings and the earliest paintings in the show, the Metropolitan Museum's *Glazier* (*c.* 1940), with its fragile evanescent figure, and the National Gallery of Art's *The Wave* (*c.* 1942-44), with its marriage of Miró and Picasso, reminded us how traditional de Kooning's gifts were, how accomplished he was as a draftsman, how adept at glazing and modeling. In this context, the characteristic, spontaneous "Abstract Expressionist look" of de Kooning's mature canvases seems like a deliberate and coolheaded subversion of his own facility. It's as though he purposely blotted and obscured his ravishing line, brutalized his refined surfaces, in an effort, perhaps, to make his paintings more immediate, less polite, less—well—traditional.

Just how abstract even these works may be is open to debate and the Salander-O'Reilly installation, deprived of the moody black-and-white abstractions of the 1940s, emphasized this ambiguity. The celebrated *Women* of the 1950s appeared to be direct descendants of paintings like *Glazier*. Even allowing for this slight skewing, it was plain that de Kooning never really was an American-type abstract painter the way Pollock or Still or Gottlieb was. For them, the canvas was a vast two-dimensional expanse on which paint could be disposed eloquently,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

charged with feeling and thought, freed from the necessities of depiction. For de Kooning, the canvas always seems to be a container, albeit a shallow one, for unstable illusions.

His paintings read almost as updated versions of Analytic Cubism, with real superimposition substituted for transparency and the illusion of superimposition. A great deal has been written about the presumed "tyranny of the Cubist grid," a convenient phrase that accounts for a kind of rigid, prismatic, or, at least, hard-edged brand of modernism, abstract or not—those paintings that look like jigsaw puzzles, constructed out of tightly wedged planes. Pollock has been praised for unlacing the Cubist corset that held surface in check, for liberating his paintings from this kind of spatial jamming and allowing them to expand and breathe. De Kooning may have remained faithful to an essentially Cubist conception of space, but this allegiance seems less a function of composition or structure than of simple affinity. The Cubists made flux and the passage of time part of what their paintings strove to address, bringing fragments of images seen from many points of view into new, precarious relationships with each other and with the surface of the canvas. De Kooning shifts the emphasis from what has been perceived to how the picture is made; it is his memory of the painting's former states, like a Cubist's memories of other perceptions, that determines what the painting looks like.

Just how dependent de Kooning was upon Cubist prototypes is clearly seen in his images of women, the focus of the exhibition at Pace. A group of key paintings and an ample selection of drawings, from 1944 to 1953, served as an informative appendix to the broader view offered by the Salander-O'Reilly show. (It might have been possible to choose a greater variety of drawings than those seen at Pace, however.) From the *Women*, de Kooning's reliance on Picasso, at least at first, was plain. The agile figures of the 1940s, before de Kooning settled on the vertical, iconic poses that recall Cycladic sculpture as much as they do Cubism, are deeply indebted to Picasso's late-Cubist bathers, just as the seated women that immediately preceded them are the direct descendants of Picasso's troubled dreamers.

De Kooning is capable, too, of slightly macabre versions of Cubism's visual puns: witness the second toothy grin on the Whitney Museum's *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-53), a red-and-white crescent that slips down to form a kind of necklace. Cover those grins, or any of the shorthand clues to eyes and mouth in the pictures of this type, and the rest is not easily distinguishable from any of the tempestuous "non-figure" paintings that followed. Yes, we have learned how to read a particular molar shape as hips and thighs because de Kooning usually surmounts them with his sign for pneumatic breasts and his equally stylized faces, but identical shapes occur in quite other contexts. It's not unlike what happens when you mentally eliminate the drawn features in Picasso's 1910 portraits of his dealers, Ambroise Vollard and Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler; the figures dissolve into a welter of planes. A system for describing begins to take precedence over what has presumably motivated description, so that motifs become interchangeable. De Kooning's women, momentarily heaved out of a sea of viscid paint, could sink back at any moment, metamorphose. In the Sixties and Seventies, they do just that—turn into clam-diggers and landscapes. As Harry F. Gaugh has said, de Kooning "ploughed her under." (I keep remembering a paper published in a Columbia University magazine, years ago, by a fellow student, now a well-known New York painter and critic. He compared de Kooning's paintings of women to pre-Islamic Persian love poems where women's bodies are described in terms of complex landscape metaphors, so elaborate that the body seems to dissolve into a landscape.)

The whole issue of subject served to emphasize the differences between de Kooning's traditional concerns and the sublime, universal themes of his colleagues. This may account for the "Europeanness" of de Kooning's paintings—a reflection, perhaps, of his background and training—but it doesn't prevent his work from looking wholly modern-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ist. What overrides old-fashionedness is his evident pleasure and trust in the expressive possibilities of his medium. Klaus Kertess, in an amazingly laudatory catalogue essay, suggests, interestingly, that de Kooning "identifies" paint with flesh, clouds, and sea, which helps to explain why his swoops and spatters read not as traces of existential battles, but as celebrations of a sensuous material; whatever meaning de Kooning attaches to his licks and flourishes, they owe more to the tradition of bravura painting of, say, Hals, than they do to Rosenberg's conception of the "arena for action." Yet the coexistence of de Kooning's virtuosity and the deliberate messiness, the near-clumsiness of his paint handling can create tension that enlivens the pictures.

Conversely, the last paintings, with their overscaled scrolls of red, yellow, and blue, suffer from being chiefly about facility, untempered by layering, cancellation, or alteration. A well-trained wrist makes elegant but, finally, empty gestures; that's all. On the other hand, de Kooning's deliberate "anti-technique" can result in paintings that appear arbitrary or schematic. The "landscape" paintings of the 1960s, constructed of giant brushstrokes, usually succeed not because of their structure or paint handling, but because of their color and scale. The Rose Art Museum's untitled canvas of 1961, for example, derives much of its impact from its expanses of clear rococo pinks, blues, and yellows, its luminous whites, rather than from its clunky "Cubist" composition.

De Kooning's drawings, throughout his career, remain among his most powerful and absorbing works. In them, there is no struggle between will and touch, only expressive transformation of the medium. De Kooning's color often has more intensity and vibrancy on paper than on canvas, since it is concentrated in individual marks, instead of being dragged into a homogenizing overpainting. But color on canvas is always problematic, with de Kooning, even after the late 1950s, when the smudged, slurred colors that had dominated his paintings earlier in the decade gave way to large blocks of relatively unbroken hues, sometimes pastel and chalky, sometimes loaded and murky. Both palettes are odd, strangely depressed, like opaque equivalents for the complicated glazes of paintings like *Glazier*. (He never again explored the clear, bright chroma of pictures like *The Wave*.) Fans maintain that de Kooning's color evokes the misty light of Long Island, where he has lived for years. To my eye, it's more of an indoor palette than an outdoor one, with yellows, browns, and blues that could be associated with seventeenth-century Dutch interiors and still lifes.

I keep coming back to these European allusions. I'm not prepared to go as far as Kertess or Robert Rosenblum, whose catalogue essays propose de Kooning as the direct heir to a great European tradition of painterly painting and invoke Rubens and Hals, among others, in support, but it's time we stopped thinking of him as a paradigmatic American abstract painter. Thirty-five years ago, Greenberg described de Kooning as a "late Cubist," an appellation that seems prescient. For de Kooning's compatriot Mondrian, the path to geometric abstraction led away from pastoral imagery, by way of a crucial encounter with Cubism. De Kooning seems to have found his way back to pastoral imagery, of a kind, *through* Cubism, transforming geometry into the sensuality of paint.

If de Kooning's paintings look increasingly European, those of Clyfford Still (1904-1980) radiate a rough-and-ready all-Americanness. While de Kooning's pictures call up associations with his Dutch ancestors, Still's remind us of nineteenth-century American romantics. His aggressively frontal structure, flamelike shapes, and banked-fire colors summon recollections of Ralph Blakelock's dramatically lit, silhouetted trees and Albert Pinkham Ryder's stormy, moonlit seas. Among modernist precedents, Marsden Hartley's confrontational mountains and wave-pounded boulders come to mind. But there is no lingering naturalism in Still's pictures, for all their associations with landscape. Some years ago, a curator at the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Museum of Modern Art tried to make a case for Still's kinship with nineteenth-century pyrotechnicians like Church or Bierstadt, claiming a similarity of conception between their large-scale panoramic views and Still's large, craggy, horizontal pictures; it all seems a little far-fetched. *How* Still's paintings are made is more crucial to their mood and temper, even to the associations they provoke, than any relation they may have to landscape—or any other subject. The real analogy between Still and Ryder is to be found in the former's dense, loaded paint and the latter's crusty, tortured surfaces, not in imagery.

Still's Americanness has a lot to do with a kind of gritty pioneer self-denial. There's no suggestion in his work that art could be anything other than an immensely serious undertaking and hard work; it's surely not fun, easy, or pleasurable. There's no virtuosity in Still, no delight in bravura flourishes. The sensual qualities of pigment that so entranced de Kooning, the European epicure, seem to have escaped Still altogether, or perhaps, puritanically American, he simply resisted. Putting paint on canvas was labor for Still and his pictures bear witness to his slow, slightly perverse method: glaciers of color are painstakingly extended across the canvas with deliberate, repeated strokes, the act of extending recalcitrant pigment itself determining the edgy, jagged shapes that measure and inhabit the field. In the largest paintings, a sense of dogged determination prevails, an insistence on getting that surface covered, no matter how long it takes, no matter how unsuitable the size of the implement to the total expanse of the canvas. At times, it is difficult to read such pictures as anything other than triumphs of stubbornness. The effect is something like that of those nineteenth-century academic battle scenes that never quite come together as pictures, but impress because you cannot imagine how anyone painted all those figures in so many different positions.

The Still exhibition at the Metropolitan ranged from a coherent picture of the early 1940s to a bombastic, overscaled effort of about 1970, from a hairy, congested effort of the mid-1940s to a surprisingly open, generous, mid-period black-and-white picture, where delicate strokes of red and blue float against velvety darkness. Still's weaknesses and strengths were equally apparent in this selection; at Mary Boone the work was more consistent. Nonetheless, it is always dangerous to draw any conclusions about Still's evolution, even from a group of pictures, like the ones at Mary Boone, drawn ostensibly from the same period, or the ones at the Metropolitan, spanning his whole career, since Still was notorious for backdating paintings. (It's a weakness he shared with Barnett Newman, who is reported to have painted, after the fact, a series of "missing-link" pictures to fill in a gap of several years in his working life.) Whatever the dates, it was clear from both exhibitions that the best Stills are usually the best because of their color; subtle, unexpected relationships of intense, saturated hues can overwhelm the insistent rhythm of strokes and bring the paintings to life. At Mary Boone, a wonderful blue and blue-black picture, *1950-M, No. 2*, set a kind of standard for unity and energy. The pulse of color was so rich that the crankiness and spottiness of paint application simply became irrelevant. Other pictures, with more violent contrasts of color—Still reveled in all-out, high-drama oppositions, no matter how close-valued—sometimes refused to coalesce into a single unified image, but fragmented into a flurry of strokes. In paintings with high contrast, where reds and ochers crackle along the boundaries of black-brown masses, or spiky black islands float in ruby seas, such color "events" disrupt the inherent all-overness of Still's laborious palette-knife method; interval and placement count for a lot and the size and proportion of the canvas become more crucial than ever. As usual, the smaller (and, often, the narrower) pictures usually come off best. It has something to do with sheer expanse and something to do with the pressure the clean edges of the canvas exert on Still's ragged interior shapes.

Still treads a fine line, in shaping his color patches, or rather, in accepting the shapes his

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

palette knife strokes produce, between "figures" so convoluted that they refuse to lock into their surroundings and shapes so bland that they resemble nothing so much as pony-skin. (When the jagged edges creep out in too many directions, the paintings sometimes suffer; some of the best have dominant interior rhythms, like the zig-zag play of the Northern Lights.) Since edges are forced to carry the burden of drawing in Still's paintings, and since the meeting of colors, the way one hue is inserted into another, are principal "events," it is impossible to say which is more important—shape, placement, or the amount of each hue. Still's complicated inlays of color always make me wonder about his awareness of the equally patchy, equally quirky works of Augustus Vincent Tack, his predecessor by more than a generation. Tack's idiosyncratic landscapes, best seen at the Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., oddly anticipate some of Still's characteristic habits of structure, touch, and drawing.

At Mary Boone, a wall of closely related pictures, all sharing a dominant yellow palette but very differently conceived, underlined the way apparently small variations could drastically alter a painting's temperature and impact. The grouping was eye-testing and challenging; its intelligence almost compensated for the irritant of the numerous and omnipresent guards, who had no qualms about walking between the viewers and the paintings. There were so many of these guards in relation to the modest number of pictures that the exhibition felt like the showing of a sanctified relic. Even allowing for the Wagnerian portentousness of the paintings and Still's pompous, self-involved pronouncements, is this really how we want to think of his work?

Strictly speaking, the Gottlieb exhibition at Knoedler had nothing to do with the glory years of Abstract Expressionism, since the paintings on view were from the last five years of Gottlieb's life and not from the days of the Cedar Bar and the famous photo of "The Irascibles" protesting the Metropolitan Museum's hostility to good new abstract art. Gottlieb (1903-1974) was a potent and original painter, and a quirky and inventive colorist, right from the beginning. His *Pictographs* of the 1940s, with their disembodied, arcane images and their allusive, elusive glyphs, loosely contained by drawn grids, are among the most convincing, achieved paintings of the early years of Abstract Expressionism.

Greenberg wrote enthusiastically about Gottlieb in "'American-Type' Painting" but tempered his praise with complaints about the painter's timidity, his willingness to settle for "pat" compositions. Of course, the essay was written (and revised) before Gottlieb had fully explored the permutations of his now famous "Burst" image—the confrontation of a vigorous calligraphic tangle and a smooth, hovering disc—that Greenberg himself celebrated in the Gottlieb exhibition he selected for French & Company, in 1960. The works at Knoedler last fall were anything but pat. Tentative, at times, a little familiar, at others, surprising and just plain beautiful, the pictures were testimony to how potent and original a painter Gottlieb was until the very end, despite the weight of age and illness, just as he had been in those heady, formative years of Abstract Expressionism.

It would be difficult to imagine a painter more different from de Kooning—or Still, for that matter—than Adolph Gottlieb. His best paintings, like the Knoedler exhibition's quivering, classic Burst, *Burma Red*, or the spare, luminous *Black Umber*, with its sprightly green calligraphy and burnt-out disc (both 1973), depend upon near-Oriental subtleties, unclouded expanses, and radiant clarity. Rosenberg's thesis simply doesn't apply to Gottlieb. There's none of de Kooning's inspired flailing, none of Still's slowed-down, crabbed version of automatism. Paintings such as *Café au Lait* (1971) are about nuances of edge and interval, ineffable variations of surface and touch, delicate adjustments of clear, singing color. It's an odd picture, at first glance, possibly too crowded, with its three discs, somewhat awkwardly wedged, its three bars and its woolly Burst. But Gottlieb's orchestration of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

shapes is so unexpected, his color so unlikely, his surfaces so delicious that the picture, against all odds, comes off. The pale scribble almost sinks into the ground, the flattened disc above it is almost invisible, at first, because their hues so nearly are the same as the field. The brighter discs press down, while the green and black bars slide out of the bottom. This uneasy association of likes and unlikes manages to evoke the out-of-doors (among other things) as much, or more, than de Kooning's declared landscapes. (I kept thinking of a phrase of Helen Frankenthaler's: "The wrong thing that makes it right.")

There's a certain amount of resistance to Gottlieb. He doesn't command the awe (or the prices) associated with his friend Rothko or with de Kooning or Still. Curious ideas attach to his work. I've often heard that the black, red, and white Bursts are the best of his paintings, the only ones really worth considering—they are certainly the most recognizable—a very odd notion, particularly considering his abundant gifts as a colorist. It may be that Gottlieb didn't produce enough mystical, anxious prose in support of his art to convince a modern-day public fond of explication of his seriousness, although you would think that his economical paintings, with their Zen-like images of universal oppositions, the yang-yin of his scrawls and discs, would have done that. It may be that today's public mistakenly equates the appearance of workedness, of labor expended with *toughness* and intensity. Gottlieb's paintings are deceptively simple; everything, even the halos that hold the discs in a nervous relation to their surroundings, appears to have magically, effortlessly floated into exactly the right place. There is none of the relentless overpainting of de Kooning, none of the brute labor of Still, just glorious color and generous drawing. To my eye, Gottlieb is a painter to be taken very seriously indeed, and in the context of last fall's exhibitions, he looked just fine.

I suppose it is too much to hope for a comprehensive, even-handed museum exhibition that would allow us to re-examine the artists of this essential generation of New York artists in depth. There *was* a revisionist effort at the Albright-Knox, a few years ago, that traveled but didn't come to New York, exactly the show we didn't need—a lopsided, politically correct effort that downplayed significant artists and significant works in favor of peripheral ones. Obviously, what happened to New York painting and, to a lesser extent, sculpture in the Forties and Fifties is more complex and exciting than we think, and any show that addresses the period properly will be full of surprises, but, I think, not the predictable "discoveries" paraded before us at the Albright-Knox. We'll just have to wait for some major anniversary. In the meantime, we can hope for more of last fall's fare.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The condescending smile of the supreme enchanter

by John Simon

Opinions about all writers are divided; even Shakespeare has had his detractors, from Voltaire to Tolstoy. But on few writers are they as widely and evenly divided as on Vladimir Nabokov. From some, he commands a vassal's fealty; from others, he elicits shudders of revulsion. Philip Rahv, no flighty hothead in his mature years, kept passionately urging me to perform radical surgery on Nabokov's reputation, which he considered as hypertrophic as the man's ego. And Rahv, who flatteringly but mistakenly considered me the man for the demolition job, could simply not understand my hesitation.

Partly, I was daunted by the magnitude of the task; even then there was too much material, both primary and secondary, for a less than rabid nonbeliever to slog through. And although I had, and continue to have, grave doubts about Nabokov's greatness, I balked at being handed a ready-made conclusion to which I only had to fit a beginning and middle. Moreover, I have the merest smattering of the language in which Nabokov began to make his literary career, and though I have made feeble stabs at comprehending Andrey Bely's theory of versification, which at one time preoccupied Nabokov, I have no grounding in Russian poetry and could never even battle my way through Nabokov's venerable four-volume translation-*cum*-elucidation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

Besides, there are works by Nabokov that I enjoy and respect, even though these do not include that gargantuan rodomontade, *Pale Fire*, or that tiresome bid to out-Joyce Joyce, *Ada*, to name only the two most hallowed masterpieces. Sadly, I had to tell Rahv that the person with the stomach and stamina for his suggested undertaking was less likely to be a fastidious skeptic than the sort of true believer Brian Boyd proves himself to be with his vast two-volume critical biography. Its first installment—some six hundred capacious pages—has just come out under the title *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*.[1] What Boyd, a senior lecturer in English at the University of Auckland in New Zealand (or is it Nova Zembla?) who was clearly inspired to learn Russian by his passion for Nabokov, has produced is not, to do him justice, out and out hagiography. Indeed, he prides himself on his "independence and . . . right to . . . sometimes severe judgments." True enough, there are reservations, and Boyd is manifestly a serious scholar who has done stunning research while manfully endeavoring to keep his worshipfulness under control.

Do, however, consider some of the judgments scattered throughout this book, and bear in mind that this is only the first volume; later works by the master are likely to call forth even greater outbursts of adulation. Already we learn, though, that even if Nabokov admired Shakespeare's way of mixing comedy and tragedy, "he wanted them more radi-

1 *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, by Brian Boyd; Princeton University Press, 607 pages, $25.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cally confounded," and did so confound them, putting him, in one respect at least, ahead of Shakespeare. One of Nabokov's stories, "Terror," may have influenced Sartre's *Nausea*, though, as Boyd approvingly quotes Nabokov himself, "without sharing any of that novel's fatal defects." And when it comes to dialogue, Nabokov's can be "barer and more realistic than Pinter's." Nabokov, then, is more existential than Sartre, more absurdist than Pinter.

In Nabokov's first novel, *Mary*, "Ganin's memories do not depend on the accident of tasting a madeleine from the *patisserie Proust*"; we are, I assume, to conclude that Ganin is a finer hero than Marcel, and, since he does not stuff himself with French pastries, a trimmer one as well. "Already as a schoolboy, Nabokov had reinterpreted the Hegelian dialectic of history," Boyd reveals, though he neglects to tell us whether this occurred in homework or in class recitation. Nabokov, moreover, is more economical than Balzac, substituting as he does "rapid shifts of focus" for more ponderous "Balzacian amassment of information." These shifts allow Nabokov to "mix the exact detail of a Van Eyck with the casually unfilled space of a Hokusai"; plainly, Balzac never moved in such fast—or, at any rate, rapidly shifting—company.

It is true that "Nature was one rival Nabokov knew he could not outdo at its own game," Boyd tells us; but not to worry, there are plenty of other games in town. One of them is surprise. Poor Tolstoy, "at the top of a page [of his] we know the mood at the foot of the page," even as on "a page of *Ulysses*, we can expect in advance the style of the coming paragraph." Too bad for the defending Russian champion and the Irish contender; they may slug as hard as anyone, but they lack Nabokov's fancy footwork.

"Nothing could be further" from Nabokov's characters "than the automata of Beckett" or Faulkner's "communities of quarter-wits, half-wits, and three-quarter-wits." Tick off one more Hibernian heavyweight and a challenger from the New World: "Nabokov, the first entomologist to count under the microscope the scale-rows on a butterfly's wing marking, insisted as an artist too on a new precision of the senses." But Nabokov outboxes (he was, in fact, quite a good amateur boxer) not only fellow writers; he can as easily take on champions from other fields: "The patterns of *The Defense*," which Boyd considers Nabokov's first incontestable masterpiece, "have Bach's melodic beauty and bracing vigor of design, but to this exhilarating combination Nabokov adds more." Indeed, the characters based on himself and his real-life spouse "are among the warmest and most touching . . . in fiction." Put that in your harpsichord, Johann Sebastian!

Nabokov's story "Terra Incognita," we are told, "might have been merely a Borgesian conundrum, had not Nabokov's passion for exploration and for nature made it something more," and down goes the sight-impaired lariateer of the pampas. So few writers can lay a glove on Vlad(imir) the Impaler that, once again, challengers from other areas must be pressed into service. Completed, *The Gift* would be Nabokov's "ninth Russian novel, and like Beethoven's Ninth it would be immensely more massive and more formally daring" than his previous efforts. Well, at least the deaf German fares better than the purblind Argentine: *this* fight seems to be a draw.

So back to literature for a return bout with Gentleman Jim Joyce: *The Gift* offers us not a mere capital, Dublin, but "a capital *and* a continent, Berlin and Eurasia," as well as —among many other things—"a portrait of the artist as a young man": the poor Dubliner has clearly lost his title. And again, Nabokov proves more daring than Joyce, who impressed Hugh Kenner by presenting Stephen Dedalus "with *lice* in his hair." That's nothing: "Nabokov introduces Zina, heroine of a novel of genuine romance, through the sound of her flushing the toilet."

Anyone holding such a royal flush (if I may change my trope) can easily outplay a mere lumbering Swede; accordingly, Nabokov in his drama "avoids the ponderous symbolism of Strindberg's *A Dream Play*." Nabokov

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even surpasses his own beloved master: in the opening of *The Gift*, "he goes one further than Gogol" in the opening of *Dead Souls*. After that, Boyd pulls out all the stops: Nabokov has "perfected a . . . sinewy suppleness [of language] and discovered fictional forms unprecedented even in the great tradition of Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov, and Tolstoy, that allowed him to express new kinds of literary truth." In his belief in literary perfectibility, Boyd is clearly the Auguste Comte of lit crit.

But he is cannier. Nowhere does he spell out in so many words Nabokov's eternal, universal supremacy. This is merely—discreetly, tactfully—implied. More concise than X, more imaginative than Y, more rapid than Z, Nabokov emerges the undefeated, not-to-be-dislodged champion without any need for blunt statements. Well, something does slip out in one place: "By the mid-1930s, and even more by the 1950s, he had developed in his fiction an uncanny freedom of part from consecutive part, and at the same time more complex relations of part to part than perhaps any writer before him." That "even more by the 1950s" is especially ominous: Will the second volume bring even greater revelations? Will the master of part song be confirmed also as the master of *cantus firmus*?

The critical biographer, after all, has three tasks: to tell the story of his subject's life, to elucidate his works, and to evaluate his ultimate stature. Broadly speaking, this corresponds to being a historian, a teacher, and a critic. Though Boyd fails in the last category, he does impressive work in the first two. And what a life Vladimir Nabokov had for a biographer to sink his teeth into! Born in 1899 into a family of fabulous wealth and fabled distinction—powerful statesmen and publicists on his father's side, verst-rich landowners on his mother's—young Volodya was the favorite among several siblings. "I was born . . . a precocious genius, a *Wunderkind*," who disported himself in the best quarter of St. Petersburg and on the grand family estates, such as his statesman-journalist father's Vyra, and his uncle Ivan Rukavishnikov's Rozhdestveno not far away. There was the added prestige of Papa V. D. Nabokov's being the leading liberal in the Czar's government, with a jail sentence and other scars to show for it.

Already as a small child Volodya has "an almost pathological ability to conjure up the past," and exercises his imagination by projecting himself into others, "trying to follow the contours of their thoughts and sensations," as Boyd, somewhat orotundly, puts it. He sprouts an extra tooth in the middle of his palate, and, at the age of five, falls precociously in love with a coeval sub-Lolita and fancies the prettiest of his governesses, Miss Norcott, "whose sudden dismissal (she was found to be a lesbian) left him inconsolable." Significantly, the child's favorite toys are *matreshki*, the hollow wooden peasant-woman dolls, each containing a smaller one within it—a foreshadowing of the games with reality the grown novelist was to play. By age eleven, Nabokov's "butterfly passion had fully taken wing," and Volodya had become a Vladimir *in parvo*.

So, too, in his love of nature around Vyra and in his love of luxury. The love of nature culminates in butterfly collecting; as Boyd has it, Nabokov's lepidopterology "would help fix the contours of his mature epistemology, his metaphysics, even his politics"—an interesting statement that is not sufficiently elaborated on. He was to impart "to his fiction the delights he found in entomology. . . . Having learned through his butterflies that the world is much less to be taken for granted, much realer *and* much more mysterious than it seems, he made his worlds to match."

But the spoiled-rich-boy side develops *pari passu*. Whereas his sisters begged their chauffeur to deposit them somewhere behind their school to avoid envious attention, Vladimir insists on being conspicuously driven to the school doorstep and helped out of the car by a chauffeur doffing his cap. Boyd comments: "It was not a parade of wealth but a refusal to suppress differences," a splendid euphemism for what starts revolutions: if

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

only the Czar could have suppressed a few differences! At age thirteen, Volodya would "lean back in his chair for his valet to remove his shoes for him," but that difference at least his sternly democratic father made him suppress. The boy was severe and unforgiving with the teachers he disliked, teasing and humiliating them. He hated school and derived most of his education from private tutors and his own reading and pursuits.

The great artist Dobuzhinsky vainly tried to teach him to paint in private lessons, but at least conveyed a sense of visual exactitude to the future writer. Rejecting his father's orthodox religion, the boy espoused his mother's nonreligious mysticism, as well as her heavy smoking. He had his first two important love affairs, and began to publish his verse, which earned him the contempt of the famous poet Zinaida Gippius and the eulogies of a sycophantic journalist; this, he was to claim, cured him permanently of all interest in literary fame and the reading of reviews. Hmm?

By age seventeen, Nabokov inherited from homosexual Uncle Ivan the manor and two-thousand-acre estate of Rozhdestveno; by next year, alas, he was an exile in the Crimea, never to see any of his old homes and haunts again. Crimea was exciting in those early revolutionary days, and, in recounting them, Boyd, as usual, keeps Russia's history and that of the Nabokovs and their friends in perfect equipoise. Vladimir has numerous entomological and erotic adventures, but none to compare with the chancy, perilous escape of the family by boat to the West. Crimea also inspired Nabokov's first chess problems (later he was to publish them along with his prose and verse), and in that "intensity of cerebration" he evolved, as Boyd radiantly expresses it, "a concentration of mental rays sufficient to burn a hole through time itself."

Nabokov's notebooks of this period reveal, along with careful studies of Russian versification, the metaphysical speculations that were to accompany him everywhere; Boyd Nabokovizes about his subject's "phonic patter and cryptic pattern." Here, too, Nabokov's lifelong enemy, *poshlost* (philistine vulgarity), begins to become an object of scorn and satire.

By 1920, Vladimir Nabokov the Elder has moved his family to Berlin, though Volodya is mostly at Cambridge University, where, it seems, he never learned the whereabouts of the main library, or whether his college, Trinity, had an undergraduate reading room. An English poem by Vladimir appears in *The Trinity Magazine*. As his father is now active in émigré journalism in Berlin, young Vladimir begins to be published in Russian newspapers and journals all over Western Europe; in years to come, under the pen-name Sirin, he'll become the brightest star of émigré literature. A knockout in the ring at Cambridge leaves his right nostril permanently S-shaped, which does not stop his amatory conquests or impede his looking down his nose at as many people and things as before. He does well on his Cambridge tripos, obtaining second-class honors; one question especially delights him: describing Plyushkin's garden in *Dead Souls*, "which perfectly suited his preference for exact knowledge, precise visualizations, detailed recall."

Back in Berlin, he supports himself by tutoring in French, English, tennis, and boxing. He also does translations into Russian; his version of *Alice in Wonderland*, we're told, is rated the best rendering of that work into any language. He gets engaged to Svetlana Siewert, a sweet seventeen-year-old, but when his promised steady job fails to materialize, her parents break off the engagement. When a former colleague publishes a "vile" review of Sirin's second volume of verse, the poet challenges him to a duel, but receives no reply. There are at least a couple other occasions on which Nabokov issued similar challenges, but, unlike Pushkin and Lermontov, he never had to face a duelist's pistol.

And now Nabokov meets Vera Slonim, the young Russian Jewess whom he will eventually marry. She preferred to spell her name "Véra," to avoid its being pronounced so as to rhyme with "queerer," was a crack shot with a pistol, and had a fine literary sen-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

sibility. Boyd lists the roles she was to perform for Nabokov: wife, muse, ideal reader, secretary, typist, editor, proofreader, translator, biographer, agent, business manager, legal counsel, chauffeur (driving was one of the few things Nabokov could not master; the German language one of those he refused to), research assistant, professorial understudy. What he doesn't mention is that she also cut up his meat into bite-sized morsels at table. But this woman with the best sense of humor Nabokov had ever encountered was never his model; as she says, "he had the good taste to keep me out of his books." And yet Boyd repeatedly tells us such things as "*Look at the Harlequins!* pays grateful homage to a woman modeled upon Véra. . . ." But, for all that, throughout their marriage except for a brief period of near-poverty in a one-room apartment, Nabokov, "a solitary sleeper by principle and inclination," slept in a separate bedroom.

By now Nabokov, who called himself a poet in prose—not just for his style but also for his way of looking at the world—was writing plays as well, and publishing both stories and verbal riddles; in private, he was not above reciting "unprintably licentious poems." Needing money, he appeared as an extra in movies, wowing starlets with his English-prince look. He tries unsuccessfully to get screenwriting jobs; his father is assassinated by a right-wing fanatic. His widowed mother and sisters are now living in Prague, and he writes them that not a day passes without heads turning in the street and whispering "Sirin!" He visits his mother in Prague and dislikes that most beautiful of cities. What he likes about living in Berlin is that, by not learning German, he can keep his Russian "vacuum-sealed." He writes his mother that they'll see his murdered father in "a completely natural heaven." Does he believe this? Boyd doesn't tell.

Already a secure storyteller, Nabokov turns to writing novels. He "still had to reinvent the arts of narrative, of character, of structure," Boyd declares, "but he was well on his way." Vladimir describes the novelist's role to his mother: "We are translators of God's creation . . . we dress up what he wrote, as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius." It seems that he always carried an entire evolving novel in his head, and could at will write down large chunks of it—in this respect, too, falling scarcely behind God.

Boyd likes to indulge in the stylistic grandeur handed down to him by his master: "Not a thick cement of fact under each step of the story," he tells us about Nabokov's style, "but a sharp stone here or there to jolt the soul." (A pun on "sole," I assume.) Again: "He thought he was simply taking up handy tools to rob the grave of its secrets, but it looked as if he were stocking a tomb with propitiatory images." Sometimes Boyd slips up, not surprising from one whose souls keep walking on sharp stones. He tells us in one sentence about a rare moth Nabokov catches in Charlottenburg; in the next, about the "moth-eaten" couch in his rented room. Surely, rare-moth-eaten.

Concerning the story "The Fight," Boyd wonders whether it is critical of its narrator or backs up his "inhuman indulgence in living as if others' pain and joy were merely for his own artistic delectation." It strikes me that *Schadenfreude* is a major component of Nabokov's make-up. Whether he writes in a 1948 letter to Edmund Wilson, "Your having taken up chess is good news, I hope you will soon be playing well enough for me to beat you," or whether he has the blind hero of *Laughter in the Dark* tortured by his wife and her lover, whom he can hear carrying on but cannot lay a hand on, sadistic glee is frequent in his repertoire. It is all over *Lolita*, for example; but I cannot deny that something in the reader's nature responds to this. And Nabokov may even exhibit a complementary masochistic streak when he writes about "the pleasant sensation of being knocked out on the chin."

Sometimes Boyd's adulation races way ahead of him. He describes a scene in a Nabokov play wherein "a newspaper sheet hangs halfway off the top of the wardrobe, a sign that a suitcase stored there has been

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

removed. Nabokovian detail at its most suggestive." Why a suitcase, necessarily? Why not a pile of newspapers removed in haste? There is always the nose-thumbing, had-you-there-didn't-I? aspect to Nabokov. Contracting to write a Russian grammar, he begins the first exercise with "Madam, I am the doctor, here is a banana." Then he dumps the assignment on Véra.

Interestingly, Boyd points out that Nabokov's best novels were almost always those he set aside to write another before resuming work on the first. The reactivated novel would then, by some strange cross-fertilization, emerge more complex, richer than originally envisioned. Boyd matches such sound, but infrequent, critical observation with staggeringly industrious research. We learn that once, in London, Vladimir danced the foxtrot with Pavlova; or that, another time in Berlin, he was on the panel to select the six women to vie for the title Miss Russian Colony of 1928.

His memory, especially the visual one, was exceptional; at times he complained of its overtaxing him. It is memory that helps us out of one of our two prisons—that of the present, which forbids the past; it is love, especially married love, that springs us from the second, the prison of self, which forbids access to other people. And in death, it seems, both these constraints are transcended. Such, at any rate, is the philosophy Boyd reads out of Nabokov's early novels, *Mary* and *King, Queen, Knave*. Whereupon, midway into this first volume of his biography, and about to accost what he calls Nabokov's first masterpiece, *The Defense*, Boyd launches on a sizable and not uncomplicated chapter, "Nabokov the Writer."

Here all pretense at biography is abandoned and we get nearly thirty pages of straight critical analysis. This is structurally unsettling—not only because it comes at this point, but also because it comes at all. A critical biography should be able to—as Boyd's does before and after this chapter—slip in the criticism amid the biography without noticeable loss in narrative momentum. What happened here? Did Boyd's conscience, or his publisher, or Nabokov's ghost (the biographer never met the biographee) remonstrate that, as the biography was extremely long, some claim for absolute greatness had to be made early on— preferably in the first volume, so that readers would be encouraged to buy the second?

So we get, among other things, a statement about Nabokov's compulsion, in order to map human consciousness in the round, "to collapse the world into one or two dimensions or to expand it into four or five" which "imparts the characteristic wobble to [Nabokov's] universe. . . ." That, apparently, is what angers readers who feel metaphysics to be *passé*, even though, Boyd assures us, "metaphysics will not die until humanity does." I, too, believe that; what I don't believe is that all kinds of metaphysics are equally good. Though I myself don't buy any, I am particularly put off by the collapsible and expansible kind.

"Nabokov finds the past alive with patterns," we learn, "to a degree no one before him has ever imagined." Whereupon Boyd sensibly wonders whether these patterns are perceived or created, and whether they have meanings. To this, I'm afraid, he has no answer, but he does praise Nabokov's proffering certain patterns so slight "that no reader could even notice these matching clusters until a careful re-rereading [*sic*]. Even then they may be overlooked as mere incidental decoration—*until* we discover how they take their place in a larger design that insists on an urgent explanation."

Yes, I know that Joyce made equally intemperate demands on his reader, but that excuses neither him nor Nabokov in my view. I am especially riled by that "insists on an urgent explanation"; if it's so urgent, why is it so artfully hidden as to be overlookable even on a third reading? Worse yet, what *may* then emerge is still only the question, not even a tentative explanation. All this brings out the worst in Boyd as well: "Between the tick we have heard and the tock we can expect, Nabokov shows us, our minds can make any choice they want"; and "Nabokov wants to test thought at its highest . . . thought

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anything but spontaneous, but boiling all around the event with a heat the instant alone could never generate." And so on and on.

I am reminded of two statements about Vladimir by his cousin and friend, the composer Nicolas Nabokov, in the latter's autobiography, *Bagázh*. First, "Volodya always did everything with *une superbe sans égal*"; second, a reference to Vladimir's "bottomless, punctiliously precise memory." Unequaled haughtiness and inexhaustible memory may indulge themselves in the novel as chess problem or verbal puzzle; but must the damage be compounded by the biographer's making similarly inordinate demands in basing many of his arguments on works by Nabokov he does not discuss until the second, as yet unpublished, volume?

Presently Boyd pulls out one of the grandest rabbits—almost an elephant—from his, or his master's, hat: "Only those who decide on art's indirection, its plexed ways and reversed images, seem *almost* to peer through the periscope into something beyond." (Italics mine.) After all that plexing of rays and flexing of muscles, not even to peer—only almost to peer? Such almost-peering is far too peerless for me. And when Boyd tries to forestall and disarm the opposition that may find Nabokov "too cerebral, romantic, or sensual," he is rather off the mark; the main opposition would address the smugness, the superciliousness, the arrogance that so often remove him from humaneness—sometimes even from humanity. This, after all, is the man who—from the Palace Hotel, Montreux, where his last years more or less recapitulated the luxuries of his first ones—wrote to Andrew Field: "It really is remarkable how many poets of our day, including Blok, Annenski, Mandelshtam, Hodasevich, Gumilyov, Shishkov, Bunin, and of course Pasternak, allowed vulgarisms and downright blunders to disfigure their best verse. One day I'll list and discuss the examples." That day, apparently, never came; meanwhile, we cannot fail to notice whose name does *not* figure on that list.

This, too, is the man who, as Boyd reminds us, began to refuse interviews in the 1960s unless the questions were supplied in writing and well in advance. In which case, why bother with the interview at all? Again, Boyd leaps to the defense: "It isn't that Nabokov was vain, but that, as he said, 'I speak like a child.'" And should the child in man not be heard? Boyd concludes his defense with what he seems to consider a pellucid algebraical schema for Nabokov's craft:

> Just as in nature one discovery may precipitate others or upset old orthodoxies, so Nabokov linked solution to solution, so that each answer could trigger or inhibit another: *b* becomes problematic only when *a* has been solved; *c* and *d* suddenly seem clear, though until now we had not even thought them obscure, only after *e* has been answered; *f* and *g* and *r* we recognize in a flash are related to each other [correctly "one another"] and to the old puzzle of *m* and *n*.

Every nightmare has an end, and we finally emerge from the chapter on writing into the chapter on *The Defense*, only to be hit with "this time his novel sheds all the ungainliness of definition to become poetry and drama and much more." One is reminded of Voltaire's comment on Pico della Mirandola's proclaiming himself master of all things knowable: "And several others." "Sheds the ungainliness of definition," at any rate, is a phrase that should make its way in today's world. Further, we are told that Nabokov "pays us the supreme compliment of assuming we can play like champions" and "so allows us—and this is the secret of his art—to experience the exhilaration of outperforming ourselves." Quite aside from the fact that this must be (I have lost count) the eighth or ninth secret of his art, the trouble with such a challenge is that once people start outperforming themselves, there's no stopping them. Pretty soon they have left the text and author behind and are floating somewhere in the stratosphere and shedding the ungainliness of the last shred of common sense.

In *The Defense*, it seems, we find Nabokov putting together parts of the world "with a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

speed, economy, fluidity, and harmony fiction has rarely attained." But Nabokov tells us about Luzhin's (the hero's) grandfather that he was "susceptible . . . to the doubtful splendors of virtuosity," a word of warning the author himself might have pondered. And forthwith there is Boyd instructing us, "Even after several rereadings, the participation in Luzhin's life of his dead grandfather, his dead father, and a force beyond them orchestrating their counterpoint might well seem a preposterous idea." Well, no; after sufficient rereadings, even the participation of unborn grandchildren will remain uncontested by the browbeaten and mesmerized mind.

Yet these critical extravagances do not vitiate Boyd's remarkable biographical research, his inspired detective work. Even in periods that are poorly documented, Boyd is able to reconstruct Nabokov's daily rounds, literary and lecturing activities, chores and struggles, and assorted experiences in love, friendship, and enmity. It is all there, laid out perspicuously and compellingly told, eliciting our admiration both for Nabokov's talent for survival and for Boyd's herculean spadework and skillful organization.

Soon, however, we are back to criticism and heading for trouble. Concerning the story "Pilgram," we are told: "Best of all, perhaps—and one cannot read Nabokov without grasping such facts—is that for all Pilgram's gloom at his drab street, his shop, his dingy apartment, his uncomprehending wife, the story somehow turns every one of these into a prize as rare and strange as any treasure in his shop or on the jungle slopes of Surinam." Let's see now: We can't read Nabokov without grasping certain elusive, paradoxical facts proving that constraint and shabbiness can be as glorious and rewarding as nature's most prodigally lavished bounties —indeed, more so. How? *Somehow*. "The story somehow turns . . ."

What is this Somehow—what are all these Nabokovian Somehows—really about? They are about authorial authority: It is so because I, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, say so. This authorial, authoritarian say-so dictates how a story or novel is to be read. In the case of "Pilgram," the point is to vindicate the author's straitened circumstances, his émigré existence: hand-to-mouth, if you will, but head-in-the-stars. As Dabney Stuart put it in an essay in *TriQuarterly*'s famed Nabokov issue, "an important part of reading [*Laughter in the Dark*] is the reader's consciousness of . . . the authorial presence, the controlling intelligence that is at work in every facet of the book. Things happen because the author makes them happen. . . ."

Though not so wonderful as Stuart, Boyd, and their likes seem to think, this is not contemptible. All fiction is a conscious or unconscious attempt to remold reality in some personal, special way. The true question is how skillful and valid this special kneading or pleading is—how stimulating, revelatory, and also self-effacing. If Nabokov does not pass this test with flying colors it is because writing for him is the restoration, or restitution, of the seignorial rights the revolution stripped him of, which, all too often, spells sneering, sniggering intellectual superiority. Or else it becomes, no more appealingly, a slightly self-pitying benignity—the avuncularly lecherous prologue to *Lolita*, for example.

The archenemy, needless to say, is Freud, who would deny supremacy to the Nabokov superego and make it share billing with some obscure id: the dark, undifferentiated need common to all the unwashed, rather than the fully conscious creation *ex nihilo* by the godlike author. "Nabokov," Boyd informs us, "did not see Freud in literature except for fashionable vulgarians like Stefen Zweig," who are not literature. And, parroting his master, Boyd tells us that love of William James "helped shield Nabokov against the archaic mythmaking and witchcraft of Freud." Yet Nabokov himself has been called (not displeasingly to him) The Enchanter, and there is nothing like the murderous fury of rival magicians, competing mythmakers.

It is the condescending smile of the Supreme Enchanter that ruins much of Nabokov's fiction. It shows up even in the un-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

likeliest places, such as Nabokov's moviegoing. Sirin had scant use for serious films (in a letter, he even refers to Eisenstein as "Eisenstadt"), but he adored any inept American movie. "The more casually stupid it was, the more he would . . . shake with laughter," sometimes to the point of having to leave the hall. *Schadenfreude* and patronization are the principal types of tone in Nabokov. Devout followers, to be sure, don't notice such things; it's marvelous to find Boyd speaking of "Lolita's pain—for the sake of which Nabokov wrote the whole novel," and, apropos *Despair*, of "a sympathy for others perhaps even richer than life allows."

Just how does one get this message from *Despair*? By proclaiming it—and other Nabokoviana—the gleeful inversion of values Nabokov holds dear: a parody, full of gusto, of one's own sense of art. Nothing, I think, could be further from the truth. But Boyd can even find affinities between Nabokov and Chekhov—in that they both on occasion released mice caught in traps. Can you imagine Anton writing to his mother as Volodya does to his from Paris: "Already my *bon mots* are coming back to me"? He hobnobs with the poet Khodasovich, the novelist Aldanov, and the newspaper editor Ilya Fondaminsky, and enjoys the company of the other literary and political lights of the emigration, but is saddened by his brother Sergey's homosexual lifestyle. Staying with the Fondaminskys, he is treated like a king:

> . . . he slept thirteen hours, and Fondaminsky was waiting . . . to run a bath for him when he awoke. Amalia Fondaminsky . . . provided him with a special dressing table with his own talc and eau-de-cologne and soap. She typed up the thirty-odd pages of *Despair*—its revision just completed—that he planned to read [in public]. She even said nothing when his constant smoking badly affected her lungs.
>
> As he dressed for his reading, Sirin found [his friend] Kyandzhuntsev's tuxedo jacket too short, leaving exposed both the cuffs of his silk shirt (which Kyandzhuntsev had also lent him) and the belt of his trousers. Amalia . . . quickly made some elastic armbands, Zenzinov gave him his braces, though his own trousers kept falling down, and when Sirin could at last be pronounced elegant, all three of them took a taxi . . . to the Musée Sociale [*sic*].

At the reading (Nabokov was to give many such over the years), "a dreadful woman reeking unbearably of sweat approached him and said something he did not catch"; it was a former mistress "who later in the week sent him two scolding letters." Shamelessly, Nabokov gave a three-hour reading. Back in Berlin, he started work on *The Gift*, and came down with excruciating neuralgia intercostalis: "It is a rare illness, as is everything about me." Ungrammatical, but inadvertently honest.

Problems with English translations prompted Nabokov to start writing in English. "To translate oneself is a frightful business," he writes at a time when looking after his little boy, Dmitri, was quite a chore, too: "looking over one's insides and trying them on like a glove, and discovering the best dictionary to be not a friend but the enemy camp." Still, even in Nabokov's own translation, *Despair* does not make Boyd's hit parade; the masterpieces, he tells us, are *The Defense*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Gift*, *Speak, Memory*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*. Meanwhile the Nabokovs are living in straitened circumstances but, as Vladimir puts it, they "always had enough for clean, comfortable quarters [a proud prevarication, see below] and good food, including as much fresh orange juice as baby could imbibe."

In Paris again, Nabokov, at age thirty-seven, has what seems to have been his one extramarital affair. It was Irina Guadanini's mother who, rather farcically, set it up; but the affair with Irina became a serious, bittersweet story that made him break out with psoriasis and drove him to the verge of suicide. Boyd notes that "Nabokov was never a person who knew how to take love lightly," and even after he rejoined his wife and son in Prague, he and Irina conducted a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

clandestine correspondence, in which, however, "there was never a hint of criticism of his wife." When an anonymous letter from Paris alerted Véra, Vladimir had to lie; later he confessed, but refused Véra's offer to set him free. Still, the letters continued, Véra found out, and there were many stormy scenes.

By the time the Nabokovs moved to France, the affair was over. Nevertheless, defying Vladimir's wishes, Irina came to Cannes, and there was a sad confrontation and altercation with her lover. For hours, she stayed on the beach to watch him disport himself with Véra and Dmitri; finally she left, never to see Nabokov again. He, meanwhile, had finished *The Gift*, "in the eyes of many, the greatest Russian novel of the century," a statement that strikes me as criticism by Gallup poll. Owing to the timidity of émigré publishers, it took fifteen years for the work to be published in full. Marital peace, however, was fully restored: "Ahead lay another forty years of serenely happy marriage."

The thirty pages that Boyd devotes to *The Gift*, though excessive, are intelligent, thorough, generally persuasive criticism even for those less enamored of the book than he is. Still, his writing does at times become a Nabokov pastiche: ". . . almost every sinuous sentence bulges with parentheses, like a snake rendered sluggish after swallowing too many plump, irresistible mice." Unlike Boyd's or Nabokov's, Chekhov's sentences would have set those mice free.

Nineteen thirty-eight and 1939 were to be years of near-destitution. But Nabokov, undeterred, kept writing, often in top form. Not so Boyd, when he describes Nabokov's play *The Event* as moving "like a Chekhov drama played at 78 r.p.m., with all the gestures jerkier and the voices either more squeakily comic or more gratingly shrill." This trope is doubly unfortunate: first, because a Chekhov drama is not an LP record; second, because jerkier gestures have to do with film projection, not sound reproduction. It is, however, nice to learn, speaking of music, that Rachmaninov so admired Sirin that, hearing of his financial woes, he sent him, sight unseen, twenty-five hundred francs.

For a while, the three Nabokovs lived in a one-room Paris flat where, what with Dmitri's needs coming first, Vladimir wrote on a suitcase placed across the bidet until, after sundown in the unheated bathroom, his fingers turned numb. With presumably unimpaired fingers, Boyd writes: "More than any other Nabokov work, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* bares its devices, like an X-ray of a grinning conjurer." But you don't detect conjuring tricks by X-ray, except in the unlikely case of a magician's using his own bones to conjure with. Altogether Boyd's diction, never flawless, gets sloppier toward the end of the book; we read of "a brush near death," of "V.'s dissolving into Sebastian and Sebastian [*sic*] into Nabokov," and so on.

It is one of literary history's piquancies that Nabokov worked on his first English novel with Lucie Léon Noel on the same table on which her husband had worked with Joyce on *Finnegans Wake* for twelve years. Nabokov did in fact meet Joyce at a party, without anecdotal results. Modestly, he admits, "I am always a disappointing guest, neither inclined nor able to shine socially." Though home life with the spoiled and obstreperous Dmitri is hard in cramped quarters, Nabokov writes away busily, turning out, among other things, his last Russian works: an unsuccessful early version of *Lolita*, and an equally misfired first shot at *Pale Fire*. As the first volume of Boyd's book ends, Nabokov has pretty much mastered writing in English, and, just a jump ahead of the rapidly advancing Germans, embarks with wife and child for America. "Their worries," Boyd concludes, "were over."

Not, however, the reader's. Will the concluding volume be even longer? Will Nabokov be declared in it the second—nay, first—Shakespeare? Will Boyd, so good at resurrecting vanished places and people, run amok when confronted with surviving persons and settings? Will we be treated to descriptions of every Cornell University

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

brick Nabokov's gaze glided over? The true name and location of every motel that figures in *Lolita*? Interviews with every waiter at the Palace Hotel in Montreux?

What we are unlikely to get is a full treatment of Nabokov's narcissistic gamesmanship and Olympian arrogance—what Sartre put his finger on when he said that Nabokov "never writes without *seeing himself* write, as others listen to themselves speak." True, this observation comes from a hostile critique, but one may come away with identical strictures from even the most reverential tributes. For example, William Woodin Rowe, in *Nabokov's Deceptive World*, writes: "Elusive inter-echoes from line to line, from book to book, subtly expand. . . . [Nabokov] writes from a grandly isolated pinnacle." And Julia Bader, in *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels*, observes: "The search for pattern is both chronicled by and projected onto the made-up world of self-conscious literary games. Since this world is an interior mirror of the artist's imagination as filtered through his manipulation of novelistic tools, the surface texture is the most telling reflection of a personal vision."

Do we really want a fiction full of such "inter-echoes" that requires reading and rereading the master's every self-serving word? Might we not be tempted to let him play his literary solitaire by himself on his "grandly isolated pinnacle"? Are too much "manipulation," too many "interior mirrors," more than we can use outside a megalomaniacal magician's fun house? Could "surface texture" have been elevated to heights where non-Sherpa readers cannot follow?

I think that three books constitute Nabokov's not inconsiderable legacy: *Lolita*, *Pnin*, and *Speak, Memory*. In them, Nabokov's forte, playful self-pity leavened with mocking humor, is at its strongest, as is the evocation of lost worlds. Onanistic word-games and patronizing ostentation are kept in relative check, in contrast to, say, *Pale Fire* and its nonfiction counterpart, the *Onegin* translation and commentaries, or in *Ada* or ardor to outdo everyone from Proust to Borges.

And whatever one may think of Nabokov, Boyd's book will be, in the eyes of many, the greatest Russian-novelist's-biography of the century. It is certainly minutious and monumental, splendid at rendering the details of Nabokov's life, thorough in interpreting his works, and evocative in conveying family background, historical panoramas, and personal relations. From *Wunderkind* to wanderer in exile, from *enfant terrible* to enchanter, from lepidopterist to lover, from dilettante to diligent writer, from Vyra to Véra, everything and everyone is copiously here. The evaluations may overshoot the mark, the style may fall short; but the loving scrutiny does not miss a single pattern on this rare butterfly's wings.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poems *by Walter Griffin, John Matthias & Patricia Hooper*

New Year's Eve

Dusk born, a siren comes
from a corner of the heart
where dolls were broken in infancy,
their glass eyes becoming mirrors.
Darkly lifted, their veils

drag behind us through the aisles
of memory until we can no longer remember
first light on the beach, the
smell of covers after love.
Sounds become rare, words are lost
like toys in a garden, and the end comes

in the closing of a coffin lid
where factories of sleep set in with
millenniums that ring in and out
in the toot of a passing reveler's horn
for smiling mummies dressed in the dark.

—*Walter Griffin*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Not having read a single fairy tale

for a long long time
because my children now are grown,
I buy a book of them for the child of friends
and later get caught up in it alone
waiting nervously beside the phone
for word of an adult.

Once there was a cat
who made acquaintance of a rat.
There was a peasant once
who drove his oxen with a heavy load of wood.
An ugly fisherman lived with an ugly wife
in an ugly shack beside the heaving sea.
A man was rich, another man was poor.
A father called his children in before him.
Once there was a little girl
whose mother and father had died.
Once there was a witch.

Time passes. It is late.
Outdoors the wind is howling, and it rains.
My beard turns gray and
grows between my legs, grows
across the carpet, down the basement stairs.
The house creaks. The globe
spins off its axis, smashes on the floor.

The telephone is ringing off the hook.
My daughter is all right.

—*John Matthias*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The pear tree

Nothing ever comes
of this tree, not
fruit, for the squirrels
steal it before

it ripens, not
shade, for its dead wood
was cut out, leaving little
else, certainly not

beauty, its sparse blossoms
comical near the oak.
And it gives so much
we don't want: sharp

spears scraping
the siding, a bridge
the raccoon climbs
to our chimney,

and in September the acrid
odor of rotting fruit.
Nothing
can recommend it. Still,

we keep it because
it's old, or the blade
of the axe is too dull,
or we wonder

what would we do
with the wood. . . . But I think
we keep it because
we remember a time

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

much younger, the house
heavy with heat
and anger. A breeze
came, and we found ourselves

in the yard, surprised by a gold
globe in the cool
darkness, and reached up
together, eager

to take it, the juice
spilling from tongues and fingers,
and nothing had ever tasted
so sweet, so good.

—*Patricia Hooper*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

Shostakovich decoded?

by Samuel Lipman

Was it [the corpus of Shostakovich's fifteen symphonies], then, written by the embittered secret dissident introduced to the world in 1979 via Solomon Volkov's Testimony*? It was.*

Is the new Shostakovich the real Shostakovich?

Of course.

—Ian MacDonald, *The New Shostakovich*

The lives of few composers in the twentieth century can have contained quite so much of the terror of the times as did the life of Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975). Born in the old Russia of parents belonging to the middle-class intelligentsia, Shostakovich, not yet in his twenties, found himself the shining hope of Bolshevik music; by the beginning of the 1930s, he was well on his way to being the Soviet composer-laureate. In 1936, he was brought to his knees by a vicious official attack, emanating, it seems, directly from the mighty Stalin himself.

But unlike so many million fellow victims of Stalin's purges, Shostakovich survived, managing the next year in his Fifth Symphony to make amends for his previous satirical but gloom-laden music by writing a Soviet symphonic classic, noble, uplifting, and ultimately cheerful. In his Seventh Symphony (1941), Shostakovich celebrated the heroic survival of Leningrad from the Nazi onslaught, and by the end of World War II established himself, like Prokofiev, as the musical fulfillment, in war no less than in peace, of the promise of Stalinist culture.

In 1948, the Party axe fell once more on Soviet music, and Shostakovich (along with Prokofiev and Khachaturian) was singled out for vilification, this time by the dictator's henchman Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948). Once more Shostakovich survived, and in the next year was even sent abroad by Stalin as a delegate to the infamous Waldorf Peace Conference in New York. After Stalin's death Shostakovich again emerged as a hero, this time a hero not so much of the Soviet Union—though he did dedicate the Twelfth Symphony (1961) to the memory of Lenin—as of Russia. In his last two decades of life, Shostakovich became a symbol of political dissidence, writing, for example, his Thirteenth Symphony (1962) as (in part) a setting of the dissident poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem describing the 1941 Nazi massacre of Jews at Babi Yar. The courage of poet and composer in singling out the Jews as special targets of Hitler violated the official Soviet refusal to grant the Jews any kind of independent status. Until the day of his death, Shostakovich remained a thorny problem for Communist propaganda; not surprisingly, he was nevertheless hailed in the government obituaries as a Soviet hero.

The composer I have described so far is the public Shostakovich, a rhetorically weighty and sometimes (in his early days) brash symphonist who, though successful at home and abroad with large audiences, found critical acclaim rather more difficult. But there was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

another and more intimate musical side to Shostakovich. He was a vastly admired composer of fifteen string quartets and much other chamber music as well; this *oeuvre*, which occupied him throughout his last thirty years, has seemed for most sophisticated observers the summit of Shostakovich's art, and perhaps the last great contribution to chamber music in the Western musical tradition.

It is the purpose of a new book by Ian MacDonald[1] to reverse the critical judgment that favors Shostakovich the chamber musician over Shostakovich the symphonist. It is not that MacDonald, a British music journalist who also composes, disagrees with the high regard in which Shostakovich is held: he feels that the composer is esteemed for the wrong reasons, though it must be said that he never quite states what those wrong reasons are. But he does say plainly, and at great length, just why he thinks Shostakovich should be regarded as one of the greatest composers of the century.

At the outset, it should be made clear that MacDonald's reasons for valuing the Shostakovich symphonies highly has nothing to do with a high regard for Communism or its Soviet embodiment. On the contrary, for MacDonald Bolshevism and its continuation is the "most catastrophic social system ever to have inflicted itself on the human race." He has no illusions about Stalin either as a killer or as a philistine; he has equally no illusions about Soviet man, the creation of which at some unspecified future date was used to justify every crime that could be perpetrated upon civil society. More directly, he discards all the absurd claims that the tender mercies of Communism saved Russian music and culture; he explicitly states that the Communist Party contribution to Russian civilization was ruination, not salvation.

According to MacDonald, Shostakovich's symphonies are to be seen as coded messages, as an esoteric body of secrets contained within what he refers to as (in Winston Churchill's phrase) a "bodyguard of lies." To make his case, MacDonald provides concurrent running accounts throughout his book of Soviet history as it impinged on Shostakovich's life, and of his music as it should be heard and understood. MacDonald's presentation of Soviet history is accurate and well-informed; his is a grisly story capped in all its horror by Stalin's attempt to use mass murder as a means to make a robot-like, uncomplaining, and totally enthusiastic creature envisioned as *Homo Sovieticus*, but who has better deserved the title *Homunculus Sovieticus*. MacDonald's reading of Shostakovich's music, though deeply affecting in a human sense, is revisionist, speculative, and ultimately circular.

MacDonald's revisionism consists in his verdict that the symphonies, so often derided as forced bluster and frequent vulgarity, constitute Shostakovich's chief claim to greatness. It is hardly surprising that MacDonald's high valuation extends to those less attractive works that have been seen as being written against the Soviet grain—for example, the modernistic Fourth Symphony (written in 1936, but not publicly performed until 1961) and the quasi-neoclassical Ninth Symphony (written in 1945, at a time when the composer was expected to produce something rivaling Beethoven's setting of the "Ode to Joy"). What is curious is that MacDonald is also an admirer of precisely those accessible and broadly melodic works that were officially claimed by the Stalinists as the proudest achievement of Soviet symphonism—the Fifth Symphony (with its guilt-admitting subtitle, "A Soviet Artist's Practical Creative Reply to Just Criticism") and the Seventh Symphony, known to this day by the subtitle "Leningrad" and sent around the world to exalt what the Reverend Hewlett Johnson, the "Red Dean" of Canterbury, called in 1940 "The Soviet Power."

This inclusive judgment is in fact based on MacDonald's general theory of what music is and how it should be heard. For his idea of what music is, MacDonald quotes the Gustav Mahler line that "the music is not in the

1 *The New Shostakovich*, by Ian MacDonald; Northeastern University Press, 339 pages, $27.50.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

notes but beyond them"; to say this, of course, is to take the position that the question of what music *is* must be restated as the question of what music *means*. As to what music means (here in the case of Shostakovich, but clearly more widely as well), MacDonald is quite sure:

> The music itself, being beyond the notes, can only be heard if the listener is in tune with the composer's *intentions*—for to attribute inappropriate meaning to a piece of music is to experience not the music itself, but a sort of self-hypnotic dream one is having about it.

How, then, is one to find the composer's intentions? With Shostakovich, MacDonald decided that the evidence is to be found through listening to the music with as full a knowledge as possible of what the composer was thinking and living as he was engaged in writing his music. Thus MacDonald brings political and social history to bear in his own listening and, it is his hope, in ours; he also mines fully the extensive contemporary memoir literature now available.

But MacDonald's true source for his new interpretation is one book above all others: Solomon Volkov's *Testimony* (1979), an account, said to be in Shostakovich's own words, of his life and thoughts as an artist and as a man, dictated shortly before his death and authenticated at several places in the manuscript by his autograph. The Volkov book, very likely largely true in substance but rather more doubtful on matters of particular wording, possesses many deeply affecting qualities, and remains to this day one of the chief indictments of Stalin to have appeared. MacDonald places much weight on Shostakovich's own reinterpretation of music that for years had been taken as quintessentially Stalinist:

> In *Testimony*, Shostakovich fiercely renounces all this, in particular denying that the Fifth's finale was ever meant as the exultant thing critics took it for: "What exultation could there be? I think it is clear to everyone what happens in the Fifth. The rejoicing is forced, created under threat, as in *Boris Godunov*. It's as if someone were beating you with a stick and saying, 'Your business is rejoicing, your business is rejoicing,' and you rise, shaky, and go marching off, muttering, 'Our business is rejoicing, our business is rejoicing.' What kind of apotheosis is that? You have to be a complete oaf not to hear that."

To Shostakovich's own statement that his music was at least sometimes written under compulsion and therefore in a sense insincere, MacDonald adds the idea that the music sounds like one thing but was really meant to be heard as another:

> The simplest explanation is that, like the rest of the symphony [the Seventh], the *Leningrad* march is two things at once: superficially an image of the Nazi invasion; more fundamentally a satirical picture of Stalinist society in the thirties. That is to say: the 'war symphony' legend, along with the composer's programme and movement titles, was, like the Fifth's similar accoutrements, a bodyguard of lies for his deeper intentions.

Following Volkov, MacDonald goes back into Russian history to find the origins of Shostakovich's deceptive *modus operandi*: on this account, the composer is a *yurodivy* or "holy fool," someone who can attack the powerful as long as he acts in every other way like a simpleton. In this way, the very act of writing vulgar music, alternately busily lightweight or emptily pretentious, constitutes both a documenting of evil and an action against it. Everything, then, is its opposite, even the Third Symphony (1929), a one-movement piece ending with a chorus singing a working-class text and subtitled "The First of May":

> There is no "Red Romanticism" in the Third Symphony. Swinging between exhausting bustle and browbeating rhetoric, it is a realistic, not an idealistic work. That most of the time it runs too fast in censor-evading circles to retain coherence is undeniable . . . [b]ut though a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> failure, it none the less survives through having something true to say of its time. However thin the inspiration, however hedged the creative bets, it communicates the agitation, grandiosity, and driven fear of the Russia Shostakovich was growing up in.

As with Shostakovich in his early years, so toward the end of his life. In the Twelfth Symphony, subtitled "The Year 1917," Shostakovich wrote a full-scale work originally designed as a tribute to Lenin and eventually dedicated to his memory; the failure of the work has generally been recognized outside the Soviet Union, where the music in itself has failed to win an audience, and the image of Lenin is badly tarnished. But for MacDonald, in the very falseness of the work lies its truth:

> Once it is grasped that there never was room in the Twelfth Symphony for Shostakovich to say anything serious—or even overtly funny—it becomes easier to see the work for what it is: a dazzlingly resourceful *impersonation* of the very symphony its early audiences thought they were hearing. It may not be very profound, but nor is it by any means as trivial as it may seem and, on the grounds of sustained ingenuity alone, it deserves a considerably higher reputation than it has been allowed so far.

The effect of this reinterpretation of the Twelfth Symphony, as it is of the reinterpretations of the other works MacDonald discusses, is to make Shostakovich as a composer good when he is good—and in fairness it must be said that MacDonald gives full praise to Shostakovich's extraordinary string quartets—and also to make him good when he is bad. Indeed, it cannot be said that MacDonald ever quite finds any of the Shostakovich symphonies great music *in themselves*; ultimately he, too, like other close Western students of the composer, seems to find the quartets more perfect, fulfilled works of art. But—and this "but" is central to understanding MacDonald, if not quite to understanding Shostakovich—what counts for MacDonald is the symphonies as a *human* document, a personal witness to sustained and organized barbarism, cruelty, and despotism. It is the achievement of Shostakovich as a monument to his times, a status not only unaffected by his seeming cooperation with tyranny, but actually requiring that cooperation for its full effect, that makes Shostakovich (in MacDonald's eyes) great; his great talents as a composer thus are only a means to the accomplishment of a vastly more important and more universal moral purpose.

It is because there can be no hard evidence of what music "means" that I have earlier called MacDonald's reinterpretation of Shostakovich's music speculative. When something can be both itself and its opposite, we are surely on shaky factual and logical ground; when the communication of our understanding of an art work depends on our knowledge of events, thoughts, and feelings that may or may not have inspired that art work, we are on equally shaky ground. Furthermore, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is circular to listen to Shostakovich's music in the light of the revelations in *Testimony*, and then at the same time validate *Testimony*, as a reader of MacDonald can hardly avoid doing, by what we, properly instructed, can hear in the music.

Even after making all the possible reservations regarding MacDonald's reasoning and his reinterpretation of Shostakovich, it must be admitted that he has explored in great and valuable detail a central question surrounding the creation of art in our century: what are we to make of art created under totalitarianism? This is a question perhaps easier to answer in the case of opposition and dissident work, though even here our valuations, even in such apparently simple cases as the work of Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak, are always subject to our extra-artistic sympathies and the deforming and corrupting influence of tyranny even on its enemies. But this question is a thousand times more difficult to answer in the case of work that has not only been officially sponsored but retrospectively blessed by dictators and their ilk.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Leaving aside for a moment the problem of Shostakovich, it is clear, for example, that the work of Prokofiev reached its apogee in his ballets *Romeo and Juliet* (1935-38) and *Cinderella* (1940-44); both these works were written during the heyday of Stalin, were hugely successful in official circles, and served to provide new musical material for the artistic tradition—the Russian school of ballet—in which Stalin took perhaps the greatest pride. To my knowledge, no revisionist interpretation of these works has as yet appeared, and there is still a tendency in the West to devalue them critically because they were written on order to appeal to a mass Soviet audience. Yet their appeal to music lovers is universal, transcending the hateful conditions under which they were given birth. If the example of the Prokofiev ballets means anything, it suggests that great art *can* be created under even the most despicable and humanly degrading conditions; on this view, art is more than the conditions, whether political, social, or personal, which give rise to it.

Ultimately, it seems to me, the same is true for Shostakovich. Perhaps we really need not work so hard to rescue the symphonies through elaborate decrypting and explanations. It is enough, for our opinion of Shostakovich either as a composer or as a man, that his string quartets are in fact one of the greatest achievements of twentieth-century music, and of twentieth-century art as a whole. It is enough to realize that Shostakovich's symphonies were very likely ruined as complete works of art because of the conditions of famine, fear, and murder under which they were created. Our weeping for the fate of Shostakovich and other untold tens of millions is perhaps more significant than attempting to rescue those of his works that were crippled by Stalinist pressure. It is entirely possible that while it was Prokofiev's genius that he was able to write public works of art in a time of tyranny, it was Shostakovich's genius to be able to retreat from the public maelstrom and create an intimate, individual, wholly private world.

Are we, then, to make a political judgment on Shostakovich, or for that matter on Prokofiev, because of the attempt, rewarded by more or less success, to create art under a monster such as Stalin? Is Shostakovich potentially so culpable for his public cooperation with the Soviet state that he can only be rescued by the making of "a new Shostakovich"? The answer, unsatisfying as it is, would seem to be that though Shostakovich was used by Stalin and his successors, he always reserved a private corner of his life for his music. That is a personal victory, and an artistic one, too. It seems churlish, and artificial, to ask for more.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

After the fall

by Jed Perl

In the middle of the season that saw the bottom fall out of the art market, the mood in the galleries is refreshingly calm. As I write this at the end of December there has yet to be a single gallery show this season that has galvanized the people who live for a trend. This is all to the good. Nineteen ninety/ninety-one is turning into the first season in a long time that belongs to the artists who want nothing better than to disappear into their work. As a gallerygoer I'm finding that my mind isn't so cluttered with controversies as it was a year or two ago; I'm finding that I'm not preoccupied with something that's not worth being preoccupied with, whether it's the work of Robert Mapplethorpe or Jeff Koons.

Down at the Bowery Gallery, which is in the habit of mounting a December "Small Works" show that consists of contributions by gallery members and their friends, there was a very strong showing of painterly paintings—paintings that were representational, semi-abstract, or abstract. Richard La Presti's still life, done in a heavy, choppy brushwork that kept his ordinary objects in a state of Cézannesque immanence, had a miraculous atmosphere: dense yet light-filled. (And, at 150 dollars, it was probably within the budget of a secretary who'd been laid off by Drexel Burnham Lambert.) Next door, the Prince Street Gallery was celebrating its twentieth anniversary with a show of old and current members. This was another strong showing of painterly paintings. One standout was Henry Finkelstein's Expressionist bouquet of flowers, a painting with the casual atmosphere of an oversized sketch. Uptown, the very mixed bag of Hirschl and Adler's "British Imagination" show strengthened my impression that another Expressionist, Leon Kossoff, is the most exciting artist to come out of England since the days of Moore and Hepworth. (Hepworth was represented by an impressive *Pierced Hemisphere with a Cluster of Stones*, from 1969.) Kossoff's two small paintings from 1989—they reprise two of his habitual subjects: Hawksmoor's Christchurch and the bespectacled man named Chaim—are impacted yet luminous. Kossoff likes to tilt his compositions, so that the central axis of these squarish paintings runs diagonally; but this is no mere affectation. That tilt comes out of the pressures of seeing and feeling. Kossoff's London streetscape has never before been quite so silvery; the planes of Chaim's face have never before made me think of the intimate clarity of a Fayum portrait.

Cosmopolitanism means living in the present, but the cosmopolitan present is a present that sees everything within the defining perspectives of the past. When the ideological storms abate, those perspectives are easier for us to see. Sometimes, an artist's true relation to the past is revealed only after the ideology that brought his work to prominence has had its day in the big city and has spent itself in the provinces. The work of Al Held, whose mural-sized paintings were

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

icons of post-painterly cool a couple of decades ago, has begun to look both more personal and more tradition-conscious. Held, who showed recent paintings at the André Emmerich Gallery in November, has always painted small paintings alongside the overscaled ones (he still does the overscaled ones). In recent years those small paintings have been the vehicle for Held's most sophisticated "takes" on the Constructivist past. Held uses Constructivist forms but has a Mannerist form sense. In the oversized paintings the form sense forces his geometric objects into overly ambiguous relationships and the paintings turn into sci-fi labyrinths. In the smaller paintings—I'm thinking of those in his past two shows that are in square or near-square formats, where there are large cube forms that echo the rectangle—the tension between Constructivist and Mannerist impulses has some resonance. The claustrophobic, labyrinthine space in these paintings reminds me of Renaissance marquetry work, with its intricate perspectives. An important example is the Studiolo from the Ducal palace in Gubbio that's in the Metropolitan Museum. This dates from 1479-82, thus it is not really Mannerist, but the idea of turning a space filled with objects into a kind of dreamlike maze is one we associate with Mannerism—whether the paintings of Bronzino, the architecture of Giulio Romano, or the prints of Erhard Schön. Come to think of it, Held's color is also rather Mannerist: he radically revises the light-and-dark contrasts of nature, either through exaggeration or suppression. Held's technicolor color, like the porcelain color of Mannerist paintings, is a caricature of naturalistic color. But this color also ties Held back into a line of development in Constructivist painting—the line that runs, roughly, through the early, serious Vasarely, back to Herbin, and then, through Herbin, to the later work of Kandinsky. In his smaller, boxier paintings, Al Held turns up the pressure: he's boxing himself in, pushing himself into the past. Held still has his 1970s high-tech chic—that's his personality as a painter, and one wouldn't want him without it. The mural-sized Helds, whether in black-and-white or color, are, to my eyes, merely high-tech chic. The smaller full-color paintings in the recent Emmerich show are high-tech chic plunged back into history: they elegantly implode.

As the media maelstrom that blew the 1980s art stars into town blows out of town, a lot of overhyped artists are left trying to jumpstart sagging careers. Eric Fischl jumpstarted his career at the Mary Boone Gallery in November by plugging into a new Third World subject (India) and a new academic realist technique (à la Velázquez, I imagine he imagines). Critics noted an increased weight and sophistication. Someone I know observed, "The paintings are beginning to look coherent." This coherence, such as it is, has to do with Fischl's growing affection for painterly chiaroscuro. The exaggeratedly sculptural figures are sunk into an unrelievedly dark space, and the dark, worked from side to side of the painting, sort of pulls it together. This is what the commercial photographers of the late nineteenth century called Rembrandt lighting. Fischl, who works from his own photographs, is painting imitations of Rembrandt lighting. Now that the shock-value subject matter that brought Fischl to stardom in the 1980s has lost its interest, this artist appears to be reaching for stability and structure—which he associates with a sort of sub-Manet technique. I used to think that Fischl was attracted to sentimental chiaroscuro for its kitsch value. Now I suspect that he's going this way because he doesn't know where else to go. He's just maneuvered himself into art-world fame, so why should we expect him to know what structure in modernist art (or any art) is all about? He has as little art culture as the man on the street, so he's left with the man on the street's idea of real art: it's à la Velázquez, Rembrandt lighting, sub-Manet.

Walk through the New York galleries and you know the state of art in the entire world. No other city has New York's range and depth. Without ever getting on a plane, you can observe the work of a Londoner, Leon Kossoff, grow in flexibility and subtlety.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Meanwhile, you can keep abreast of the latest high-camp confection from the continent: the colored photographs of Pierre et Gilles, which were at Hirschl and Adler Modern in December. These two Frenchmen aren't the first artists to ask the best-looking boys and girls in the world to impersonate Catholic saints and other assorted icons; but they do have their smidge of kitsch originality. By hand-painting their photographs—most of which are fifteen by twenty inches—they give their sexy subjects the smooth unreality of soapstone sculpture. The adorable St. Martin, all dressed up in a suit of red and gold Roman armor out of a Poussin painting, would have turned heads at one of the Vicomtesse de Noaille's costume balls sixty years ago. He turns heads today. I looked at every photograph in the Pierre et Gilles show, enjoyed them for the minutes it took to go around the gallery, and will not be disappointed if I never see them again.

This season, as the ideological storm abates in the galleries, the flotsam and jetsam that it leaves behind is settling in the museums, which are turning out to be the repositories not only of masterworks but also of tired controversies. That's basically how New York regards Kirk Varnedoe's and Adam Gopnik's "High & Low" show at the Museum of Modern Art—as shopworn ideology. Up at the Whitney, where last week's gallery brouhaha is this week's curatorial coup, there is a show called "Mind over Matter," which brings together work by six young post-Conceptual artists. Liz Larner has a genuine feeling for materials: when she fills a corner of the room with strings of shiny chain-link she gives Minimalism a personal inflection. And I have found some of Ronald Jones's installations at Metro Pictures compelling—especially the one that described the Nazis' use of Erich Mendelsohn's modernist Columbushaus department store as an SS center for detention and torture. But Larner and Jones are, despite their heavyweight materials and subject matter, artistic lightweights. What they have produced so far adds up to a few elegant footnotes to a late-modern aesthetic that conflates Dada and purism—and is itself little more than a footnote to a certain side of Duchamp. The work of these two artists is not, either by virtue of the originality of its conceptions or the beauty of its effects, museum material. The silkscreen paintings that Robert Rauschenberg did between 1962 and 1964, which are the subject of a concurrent Whitney show, aren't museum material either. Rauschenberg can't even hold the photosilkscreen elements together inside the rectangle—stuff just flies around, randomly, anarchically. This artist doesn't possess even a rudimentary design sense. I suppose that's the (let's call up John Cage and find out what the *I Ching* has to say) point.

With time, patterns emerge. Rauschenberg's swank Dadaism of the 1960s is recapitulated in any number of 1980s careers. Stick around and things come around again—and again and again. This is for better and for worse. And New York City—with the geometric regularity of its streets, against which we trace the gradually shifting relations and natures of uptown and downtown, east and west—helps the patterns to emerge. In the past few months New York, which has seen a long stretch of clear cool beautiful weather, has been clarity itself. There have been whole weeks of perfect gallerygoing weather when there's no shock of heat and cold involved in moving back and forth between the gallery and the street. Sometimes during this season the tops of the buildings silhouetted against the sky have looked preternaturally beautiful—"miraculously intense, a feeling like looking at Egyptian sculpture," is how Edwin Denby described the effect nearly forty years ago. On a clear day in New York you can see for miles. And on a good day in the galleries it's possible to gain perspective. Just now there is a little less media- and market-borne art pollution obscuring the view.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Becoming Brancusi

by Eric Gibson

This fall the Gagosian Gallery on upper Madison Avenue departed from its usual pattern of theme exhibitions by postwar American artists to offer something entirely unexpected, a handful of early sculptures by Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957).[1]

This show was originally planned as a touring exhibition, its second stop to have been the Detroit Institute of Art, but, as *The New York Times* reported shortly before Christmas, the loan of the sculptures had caused such a political scandal in Brancusi's native Romania that they had to be returned immediately after the exhibition closed at Gagosian. Given the exceptional nature of the loan, and the ensuing commotion, it is unlikely that they will ever be allowed out of the country again.

That fact alone made "Brancusi: Masterpieces from Romanian Museums" a noteworthy event. Yet it was one of those exhibitions that create very little stir. It may be that the sculptor is so familiar to New Yorkers from the extensive holdings of his work in the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and the Metropolitan that there seemed to be little more to learn about him.

Or it might have been the work itself. The Brancusi on view at Gagosian was, in certain respects, a completely different artist from the one familiar to us. Instead of the modern sculptor of pure forms and dreamy peacefulness, here was someone working his way out of the nineteenth-century tradition of modeled figures. And instead of elemental carved abstractions, here were naturalistic human forms, half of them cast in bronze. To anyone not familiar with this phase of Brancusi's career, these sculptures must have appeared to be little more than inconsequential juvenilia, pieces executed when Brancusi was still searching for an artistic identity, and thus of only marginal interest.

In fact, they weren't. Although among the earliest sculptures Brancusi ever made, they constituted a kind of stop-action re-creation of the crucial period in the sculptor's evolution. By revealing a new dimension of an artist we otherwise know well, the exhibition showed us Brancusi becoming Brancusi. His thought processes seemed not only manifest, but palpable. This is, of course, exactly what one most wants from this kind of single-artist exhibition. But how often do we really get it?

There were six sculptures in "Masterpieces from Romanian Museums," all done between 1905 and 1909. Three were bronzes: *Pride* (1905), a bust of a girl; *Head of a Boy* (1906), another bust; and *The Prayer* (1907), a meditative, kneeling female figure. The rest were stones: *The Kiss* (1907), Brancusi's first attempt at his signature motif; *Sleep* (1908), a naturalistic head set within a cloud of roughed-in marble; and *Trunk* (1909)

1 "Brancusi: Masterpieces from Romanian Museums" was on view at the Gagosian Gallery from November 3 through December 15, 1990. There was no catalogue.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

—also known as *Torso*. A nearly ten-inch-tall marble of a woman's midsection bending forward slightly, *Trunk* was the most Brancusiesque work in the show.

Sidney Geist, in his monograph-catalogue *Brancusi: A Study of the Sculpture* (1968), lists some fourteen early Brancusis in Romanian museums. One could have wished that two others were included in this otherwise well-selected exhibition: the 1906 *Portrait of Nicolae Darascu*, which strongly recalls Rodin, and the 1901-2 *Ecorche*, or flayed figure, its skin removed to reveal the body's musculature. The latter is an academic set-piece, of interest mainly because it is so accomplished that, again according to Geist, it is still used by students in Romania. The *Ecorche* would have provided a kind of aesthetic benchmark against which to measure Brancusi's subsequent departures from academic art.

The six sculptures at Gagosian encompassed the major milestones in the course of this early formative phase of Brancusi's career. They showed him gradually turning his back on academic art, with its canon of truth to nature. After an interlude under Rodin's influence—Brancusi was briefly the older artist's assistant—a reaction sets in. Rodin's rhetoric, expressed in the melodramatic gestures of his figures, was an obstacle. So was narrative. Finally there was the problem of what Modigliani is said to have called the "mud," Rodin's profusion of bronze figures modeled in clay, as stiflingly academic to advanced artists of the day as were the marbles of official art.

In this connection, *The Prayer* and *The Kiss* are particularly important. It is in *The Prayer* that Brancusi really breaks with Rodin. Although traditional in subject, and still modeled, the handling is more restrained and attentive to an overall, shallow surface uniformity. Also, the simplification of the body, especially the thighs, head, and arms, was entirely his invention. *The Prayer* shows a new form-language coalescing under the skin of tradition.

And this version of *The Kiss* represents Brancusi's third, but most important, foray into the realm of direct carving. Sculptors had always carved, but typically had used a pointing machine to translate the form of the preliminary model into the final, scaled-up version. Brancusi's approach was to attack the stone without models or pointing machines—directly. Besides emancipating him from academic (and Rodinian) practice, this amounted to a kind of liberation of the creative spirit, since it dramatically reduced the distance separating the initial idea and the finished work of art, fusing creative expression and manual labor into a single continuum. Finally, the roughened surface of the stone which remained after the artist's tools were laid aside introduced an expressive element to the work which further distanced it from the polished surfaces of academic art. Brancusi's pioneering use of direct carving established an alternative and decidedly modern approach to making sculpture, which made him, for a time, the leader of the sculptural avant-garde.

The main theme of this exhibition, however, was Brancusi's concentrated rethinking of the human figure as the primary subject and vehicle of artistic ideas in sculpture. In this effort, Rodin and the academy are Brancusi's foils. And while nature remains a constant reference, there is in Brancusi's work a growing attempt to depart from it but not to abandon it altogether.

Thus, no doubt taking a cue from Rodin, Brancusi rejects the idea of physical wholeness as a prerequisite for the figure. Going beyond the accepted convention of stopping the body at the chest for a bust, he chops off an arm in *Head of a Boy*, but leaves the other. It's a seemingly nonsensical, arbitrary action, one that violates our reflexive acceptance of this figure as an analogue for ourselves. But for Brancusi, it is an important action. It helps move the figure, ever so slightly, onto another aesthetic plane.

In the same sculpture, he turns the head awkwardly, to the side and down, and gives the face a curious expression. These decisions don't really contribute much to the emotional impact of the sculpture. The pose was a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

common one in the sculpture of the time, but this version of it has an intensity that tells us more about the sculptor, I think, than about the little boy who is his subject. One feels Brancusi is wrestling with the question of gesture in sculpture, trying here to find an animating pose for the body that is not a cliché—and not Rodin. The effort seems forced and the result is not particularly successful.

At this time, Brancusi was also deeply immersed in exploring the structure of the human figure as expressed in sculpture. The figure's internal relations, how it holds itself up, and how it relates to the space around it all become matters for his attention. Symmetry, and by extension balance, are the primary avenues through which he approached these matters.

Pride is conventionally symmetrical, while *Head of a Boy*, with its missing arm and rotated head, is dramatically not. Being a kneeling figure, *The Prayer* has to be symmetrical, such is the nature of the act of kneeling. But, perhaps to break away from the dictates of nature, or possibly for more practical reasons of physical stability, Brancusi places one of the figure's knees slightly in front of the other. More important, he tilts the figure precariously forward, leaning it so far off its center of gravity as to create an almost cantilever effect. This adds a measure of vitality to the sculpture, counteracting its mood of sentimentality. In addition, *The Prayer*'s probing of gravity points to later work, such as the *Bird in Space* series, in which freedom from the earth's pull becomes a central part of his subject.

The Kiss marks a decisive return to symmetry, and Brancusi's acceptance of it as a kind of governing principle for the remainder of his career. Brancusi's wrestling with symmetry was not, it seems to me, an idle formal problem, but one intimately connected to his assessment of what was wrong with figurative sculpture and to his personal ambitions for it. Symmetry is a fundamental condition of our physical composition as humans, and therefore of academic sculpture. Everything is ordered around the spine. All artistic influences aside, Brancusi must have felt that an essential precondition for making the sculpted figure anew—or at least for breathing new life into it—was somehow to overcome the tyranny of left-side/right-side.

That he returned to symmetrical compositions quickly—within the space of a year—suggests either that symmetry wasn't a problem after all, or that he did indeed find a way out of his problem with it. The former is unlikely, since nearly every sculpture of this interval involves a twisting figure—visible most notably in two pieces called *Torment*. It seems more likely that Brancusi *did* find a way out of his problem with symmetry, though a way out that represented a paradox of sorts. For Brancusi overcame the problem of symmetry simply by accepting it, or rather recasting it. The symmetry of *The Kiss* is one of design in competition with nature. The joining of two figures, and the stylized manner in which they are rendered, introduces an element of abstraction which nullifies the academic associations of the single human figure. And in Brancusi's mature work, the elemental forms (those based on the egg, for example) provide a way of representing the human figure without implying a spine. They thus distance themselves from academic naturalism.

Trunk is the culmination of these efforts. Although retaining some vestigial appearance of naturalistic fleshiness, it is the artist's first self-contained fragment-object. The Brancusi we know begins here. Though it was the smallest sculpture in the exhibition, it stood apart from the rest, a work of sublime, quivering beauty.

The sculpture is, as I have already stated, a nude female figure seen from lower abdomen to upper thigh, and bent slightly at the waist. It is, in fact, the midsection of *The Prayer* duplicated exactly but now on its own, like a single brick removed from a wall. It thus shows Brancusi operating, for the last time, within the orbit of Rodin. Not only is he making use of a partial figure, a Rodin staple, he is cannibalizing his own work,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

something the older artist did constantly.

Yet the connection to Rodin hardly matters here. Rodin may be present in the idea of the partial figure, but what is important is that Brancusi does something entirely individual and new with it. His use of but part of a figure is the first step in his eventual transformation of the figure as a sculptural idiom.

We're so familiar with Brancusi, and so conditioned in the wake of much postwar art to the idea of formal simplicity, that it's easy to see him as an artist who merely reduced the figure in order to arrive at his characteristic sculptures, as though they had been turned on a lathe. *Trunk* shows that there is more to it than that. It stands apart because it conveys a greater feeling of physical density than any of the previous sculptures. This is partly a function of its material, stone, but only marginally so. The real reason is that Brancusi here subjects the figure to a powerful compression so that everything the body has to express—its function, its organic vulnerability, its capacity to speak through gesture—is contained in a single, integral mass. Simplification is part of what Brancusi does here, of course, but concentration is an equally important part.

Beyond the use of the partial figure, Brancusi achieves this feeling of compression and containment by two formal means. One is an unbroken contour, as hard and clear as a drawn line by Ingres, which simultaneously defines the outer limits of a shape and firmly contains it. Brancusi's line is like a lasso; as much as anything, its purpose is to restrain. We hear little about Brancusi's "drawing," yet it is vitally important to his art.

The other thing that contributes to the feeling of compression and containment that Brancusi's sculpture communicates is its evenly swelling mass. On planes facing the eye, this translates the firmly enclosing line of the edge into a surface membrane containing the mass pushing against it from within. It was this feeling of organic mass contained behind a taut surface that allowed Brancusi to polish his marbles Salon-sculpture smooth without having to worry about their being infected with any of the saccharine preciousness of official art. He was expressing something entirely different.

Nowhere is this sensation of compression felt more acutely than in the realm of physical gesture. *Head of a Boy* shows Brancusi searching for a new way to incorporate gesture into his work, to articulate the figure in an expressive fashion, but without any of Rodin's overheated rhetoric. *Trunk* announces his solution to the problem, which is, quite simply, to internalize gesture, to make it subordinate to the physical mass of the sculpture. Here, the body bends—in a deliberately ambiguous action—yet without violating the sculpture's center of gravity or our sense of it as a thing. It is a discreet motion, one that announces the primacy of pure sculpture over narrative.

Brancusi's mature works follow the pattern established in *Trunk*. In the *Bird in Space* sculptures, the merest backward tilt is the only hint we get of physical motion. The effect is powerful, though; it suggests exultation. And in the Museum of Modern Art's *Fish* of 1930, Brancusi is even more extreme in asserting the primacy of the sculptural mass, but correspondingly more poetic in his suggestion of motion, which is what gesture turns into when your subject is the animal kingdom. There is no specific fish described here. Brancusi doesn't give us a wiggling form. Nor does he, as he might have done had he tackled this subject at the time he carved *Sleep*, leave a roughened marble surround to suggest water. Instead, it is all in the material. He gives us a slender, tapered slab of gray marble. Its generalized form suggests something glimpsed in transit, while the flecks of white within the gray stone suggest light dappling the creature's skin as it moves beneath the surface of the water.

Upon quitting Rodin, Brancusi famously remarked, "Nothing can grow in the shadow of the great trees." "Masterpieces from Romanian Museums" showed that stepping out of that shadow entailed more for Brancusi than simply crossing the studio threshold. But is also showed him beginning to cast a sizable shadow of his own.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

The interests of the Group

by Donald Lyons

On a wintry Saturday afternoon recently I was sitting in the Anspacher Theater at the Public. It is a soaring, two-tiered room, the old atrium of the main reading room of the Astor Library. It rises on painted, cast-iron columns to a congregation of domed skylights. A weak, milky light filtered down more in sadness than in hope. The spindly chamber (what ceremonies of civic and cultural virtue had it witnessed? did Henry James know it? I must look up *American Scene* when I get home) was drafty; the bold gusts of wind were scarcely impeded by the thirty or so people huddled in the middle of the room. I had bought the *TLS* for the subway ride down and had been reading in it of Alan Hollinghurst's new translation of Racine's *Bajazet* as performed at London's Almeida Theatre. I was keenly tempted to take the journal out of my pocket and continue reading. I remembered there was something on Bismarck; a new study of Jules Verne; I could tackle that review of *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility* . . . anything. But minimal manners enforced a semblance of attention to the play in progress.

It was something called *The Big Funk, a casual play or talk around the Polis*, by John Patrick Shanley. In it five garrulous nonentities declaim at length on the meaninglessness of things. Characterization is attempted when obnoxious Omar throws rubber knives very near the audience (this was, however, insufficient to wake up the elderly gentleman happily slumbering next to me) or when glum Gregory puts Vaseline all over Jill's hair or when, a bit later, perky Austen gives tolerant Jill a bath and a shampoo and a rubdown right on stage to close the first of (mercifully) two acts. At the dinner party which occupied the second act, Jill, a glutton for grease, rubbed olive oil over her face, but this time Austen removed not her clothes but his own, and walked "starkers" (as they say in *Vile Bodies*) up and down in front of the first row prating about nudity or something as a purification from the big funk of mendacity or something in which we are all trapped or something. (It is, I am convinced, only the fact that *The Big Funk* closed prematurely a few days after I saw it that kept the cast from severe encounters with pneumonia.)

"The play's governing metaphor is that of a cleansing storm that will wash away the self-defeating funk of the entire world," helpfully explained the *Times* critic in a mixed review that did nonetheless speak of Mr. Shanley's "real" talent. Mr. Shanley, best known as the writer of the awful, patronizingly "ethnic" screen comedy *Moonstruck*, has unfortunately no talent of any kind. Sophomoric inanities punctuated by hot tubs and naked promenading—what befogged inattention caused the Public to deem this a theatrical innovation worth staging? At that moment, other Public stages were being occupied by a *Caucasian Chalk Circle* set in the Caribbean and by a "performance" piece equating Reagan to Hitler. It is painfully evident that no standards, no vision, no criteria of sense

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

even, guide the Public, which functions pretty much as a garage for whatever has captured the whims of its managers. All that is required is subscription to the broad dictates of the leftist catechism of the moment.

Sitting in the Anspacher, chilled by the breezes, chilled more deeply by the chaos before me, and envious of what a Londoner could do of a Saturday afternoon, I asked myself, Was New York always a third-rate theater town without a grip on the past or a compass for the future? Musicals aside, what institutions had the New York theater ever had to show? Maybe the Group Theatre of the 1930s, say, wasn't such a bad idea after all. Nothing could be worse than *The Big Funk* and the system (I don't mean just the Public) it bore witness to. Nothing.

Gilding the past, of course, comes easy in the face of the present tin age. A check is luckily to hand in a new book on the subject, *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940*, by Wendy Smith.[1] Miss Smith's book will inevitably and unfavorably be compared to *The Fervent Years: The Group Theatre and the Thirties*, by Harold Clurman, the dapper Ariel of the Group. Clurman's book was written in 1943-44, just a few years after the dissolution of the enterprise, and, while it is full of the fizzy eloquence and rhetorical afflatus of the consciously charismatic founding master, it has the defects of Clurman's virtues. It is all fire and air, with not enough admixture of plain earth. Clurman was involved with—"enslaved by" is how Elia Kazan put it—Stella Adler, the Group's *prima donna assoluta* for the whole of its existence, and, while he does not conceal the relationship, he scruples to describe it at all fully. And Clurman had also, in 1943, to cosset the feelings of Lee Strasberg, the Gradgrind of the Group, commissar of acting who mercilessly and daily inflicted upon the Group ritual humiliations in the name of "affective memory" and a few other such half-understood tags from Russian sources like Meyerhold and Stanislavsky. It was, of course, the Method and its techniques for emotional honesty that were being evolved and worked out on the bodies of the Group by—supreme irony—a cold egoist impervious to any emotion save unsmiling and unremitting mastery. Clurman, then, handles the Group's sacred monsters with disingenuous circumspection and, in general, tends to overlook the unpleasant and the contentious, so rapt is he in the fervency of his self-regarding enthusiasm.

Miss Smith is, by contrast, nothing if not thorough and candid on the quotidian realities of Group life. We hear what Ruth Nelson said to Clurman and what John Garfield felt about Luther Adler and what Cheryl Crawford wrote to Franchot Tone and what Morris Carnovsky . . . It is in fact a bit overwhelming, not least because of the mediocrity of much of what was going on. There were but two outstanding productions from the Group in its first four years: first, *Success Story*, by John Howard Lawson, about a young radical's sacrificing his sacred radicalism to careerism in an advertising agency. Strasberg directed Stella Adler and her brother Luther and Franchot Tone and Morris Carnovsky in it after "the Group" had unsuccessfully tried to convince Lawson to add an upbeat, "revolutionary" ending (there's a bit of historical irony here, for Lawson, who then resisted dogmatic interference, was later to become a famously meddling Stalinist). And second, Sidney Kingsley's doctors-and-nurses play *Men in White*, which featured Strasberg's "operating-room scene" with masks and gowns and reflectors right onstage (so perhaps in a way *The Big Funk* was in a tradition after all).

At the end of 1934 the Communist cell in the Group, ordered to confect a play by the overtly Communist New Theatre League, collectively improvised a piece about a New York taxi strike and gave it to novice playwright Clifford Odets to take to a hotel room and homogenize into his own distinctive staccato urban patois. The result was *Waiting for Lefty*, staged by the actors themselves (with-

1 *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940*, by Wendy Smith; Knopf, 482 pages, $24.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

out Strasberg or Clurman) under the nominal direction of Odets on January 13, 1935, at the Civic Repertory Theatre on Twenty-third Street. The opening night, which ended with a fevered audience screaming, "Strike!," became legendary. (I must point out that this account of the origins of *Waiting for Lefty* is from Elia Kazan's *A Life* and is unconvincingly and limply denied by Wendy Smith, who speaks of "a mist of different, sometimes conflicting, stories.")

Waiting for Lefty—in its brutal simplicity and simplistic brutality—remains the most effective work of American agitprop theater. But Odets's masterpiece is assumed to be *Awake and Sing!*, produced at the Belasco on February 19, 1935, with Clurman directing the Adlers and Carnovsky and Garfield in a drama of claustrophobic tensions in a Bronx Jewish family. The grandfather, an embittered socialist, urges his grandson to "take the world in your two hands and make it like new. Go out and fight so life shouldn't be printed on dollar bills." The boy works hard but cannot satisfy his demanding mother. He asks her, "What do I do—go to night-clubs with Greta Garbo?" and she answers, in the same wearily sarcastic rhythm, "Summer shoes you never had, skates you never had, but I bought a new dress every week. A lover I kept . . ." When not urging idealism upon his grandson, the old man utters harangues about "the mills in the South" and World War I, where "hundreds of thousands of workers and farmers . . . murdered each other in uniform for the greater glory of capitalism." Finally, the kid comes to realize the value of union solidarity "at the warehouse" where he works and at the end— "I'm 22 and kickin'"—moves out of the house to conquer New York.

Awake and Sing! was done by the Group over the objections of Strasberg, who imperially announced to Odets and the entire company, "You don't seem to understand, Cliff. We [he meant "I"] don't *like* your play." Actually, Strasberg had a point, for *Awake and Sing!* is sentimental junk, manipulating its glibly repeated Yiddish syntaxes and intonations for fundamentally unserious purposes —either cheap pity or fake uplift. It is no wonder Odets went off to Hollywood, but the myth of his having there squandered his genius is bogus, for he had no genius to squander. Odets had no idea what to do artistically with his angry memories of the Bronx, and he never found another subject. (*Golden Boy*, his last work for the Group, was his old subject in boxing trunks; such later efforts as *Clash by Night* and *The Country Girl* were mere floundering.) By comparison, the Arthur Miller of *Death of a Salesman*, writing fourteen years later in the shadow of Odets but also in the shadow of moral masters like Ibsen, can cover roughly the same territory with at least a glimpse of its tragic possibilities. (And even in the Thirties, naturalistic writers like James T. Farrell seem much richer artists than the thin Odets.)

And speaking of Yiddish, it is with a real sense of loss that we read, in books about the Group and elsewhere, of the Yiddish theater of the just preceding generation. The great Jacob P. Adler, father of Stella and Luther, was its leading star, known for his Hamlet. It was a theater that regularly did Shakespeare and Gogol and Tolstoy and Chekhov and Andreyev as well as (in Clurman's words) "plays modelled after original works by Sudermann, Hauptmann and other contemporary Europeans." Here must have been God's artistic plenty, informed in every syllable and gesture by incomparable traditions of theater and of literature and above all by a mature sense of life adequate to tragedy and to comedy. What jejune fare the creeds, artistic and political, of the 1930s offered in comparison to the Yiddish theater! Significantly, the one time the Group attempted a classic, it foundered grotesquely. Clurman was directing *The Three Sisters* when, at a rehearsal, Morris Carnovsky shouted at Stella Adler, "You are not a truthful actress. I just don't believe you." (Apparently she was indulging in "Yiddish theater" mannerisms instead of Strasbergian brooding.) Tantrums all around. Adler quit. Clurman (no surprise) quit. Cast reshuffled. Production abandoned. In the Yiddish theater, flaming quarrels had been the stuff of everyday life; there

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

was a culture to absorb shocks. In the Group, any tiff might mean the end; the structure was paper-thin.

Wendy Smith is, then, fuller and franker than Clurman on the texture of everyday life in the Group Theatre. But she does repeat one of the disingenuous elements in Clurman, who, himself an elegant optimist in love with his own enthusiasm and congeniality, pooh-poohed the Communists, with all their activities in the Group, as romantics carried away from time to time by excessive rhetoric. Temperamentally, Clurman disliked confrontation, hostility, secrecy, and conspiratorial malevolence—the very meat and drink of Party members—and swanned blithely above them. But what is forgivable in Clurman is not in Wendy Smith, who again and again presents contemporary Communists inside and outside the Group as slightly more principled and disciplined New Deal liberals. Without irony, indeed with a gushy admiration, she likens Group collectivist discipline to Leninist democratic centralism. The bullying thugs of the Party she cozily describes as having "a respected place at the left end of a broad consensus of progressive opinion that encompassed everyone who believed that fascism overseas must be fought, hungry people in America must be fed, workers had a right to trade-union representation, and black people deserved equal treatment." You got any problems with that? You *like* fascism and hunger and prejudice, buddy? What's your background, anyway?

Of course, these slippery sophistries and undistributed middles and unexamined assumptions that Communists really *did* believe these things rather than exploit others' belief in them are exactly of a piece with the new sweetening of American Communism as attempted in such works as Vivian Gornick's *Romance of American Communism* and Carl Bernstein's *Disloyal* and Howard Fast's autobiography. Miss Smith refers to the Soviet Union as a then-understandable beacon for progressive hopes, evincing no suspicion that its beacon-ness was strenuously and courageously questioned even, yes, in the Thirties. Her apologetics reach dizzying heights in discussing a forgotten play (Robert Ardrey's *Tower of Light*) done by the Group in November 1939. The date is important, for the original script, written in the spring of 1939, had ended with a plea for armed struggle against Nazism. But the Hitler-Stalin pact intervened between script and performance, which now concluded with an "impassioned plea for peace" and American neutrality in the capitalists' war. This craven tergiversation Miss Smith calls "an honest expression of the uncomfortable position many left-wing intellectuals took, one that soon became untenable." "Honest" is an astoundingly perverse epithet here; "soon" means, of course, though Miss Smith seems scarcely aware of it, "on the day Hitler attacked Stalin." It is ominous to see these dishonesties of 1939 so eagerly repeated in 1991. Such behavior—I refer to both Ardrey and Miss Smith—leaves one almost thirsty for the limpid waters of the Group's Broadway contemporary, Lillian Hellman.

Actually, the best book I know of not only on the Group but on the Broadway theater of the 1940s and the 1950s that so largely derived in one way or another from it (for example, Stella Adler became the revered teacher of Marlon Brando, while her rival Strasberg imposed his rigor on the Actors' Studio) is Kazan's *A Life*. Kazan was an ornery, grasping, ambitious apprentice who sassed his way into the Group in 1932. The magic of the early Group still excites him. He can describe the 1932 summer work camp of the Group thus: "May . . . was three months long that summer . . . it was May all summer that summer. The air of the place that May was sparkling and bright, as effervescent as soda. The camp twinkled with the games and the mischief of eager young artists." Rereading *Waiting for Lefty*—in which actor Kazan leapt up from the audience to denounce a scab onstage—can still make him cry.

Ever fond of the dream, Kazan became respectfully unillusioned about dreamers Clurman and Strasberg. A born writer, Kazan creates utterly fearless and rounded pictures of himself and Clurman and Stras-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

berg and (later) of Miller and Tennessee Williams, among many others, and he communicates an infectious feeling of being young and angry and horny in New York in the 1930s: "Clifford [Odets] was my best friend; we lived by night. Sometimes with Harold [Clurman], we'd walk the deserted, wintry streets and bellow in defiance. At whom? No one. Anyone." He can still feel the fever, but he has outgrown the messianic pretensions. And he also outgrew a far more poisonous illusion. He was a fervid Communist in the Group cell until, browbeaten one evening in the Strasbergs' sitting room by a Party goon from Detroit, he quit. In 1952, a firm anti-Communist, he named his cell members before HUAC. This act of courage made him a pariah in Stalinist and fellow-traveling circles and caused famous schisms in the New York cultural milieu of the 1950s. An echo of the old reaction to Kazan's testimony persists in Wendy Smith's acidulous, displeased, and distanced tone, so unlike her usual starry-eyed warmth, when she is talking about Kazan.

Kazan was, of course, to midwife the important postwar theater, imparting his brand of nervous, aggressive ferocity to the direction of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947 and *Death of a Salesman* in 1949. Miller was an obvious artistic child of Odets, wrestling with the stresses bred in an ascending immigrant family. More surprisingly, as Kazan revealed in his eulogy of Odets, Tennessee Williams's "first arousing experience in the New York theatre was *Awake and Sing!*" *Streetcar* and *Death of a Salesman*, both of them suppler and subtler and sexier variants of Groupesque naturalism, strike me as still today the American theater's best.

With one majestic exception. In 1940, the year the Group folded in quarrelsomeness and poverty of material, Eugene O'Neill at last confronted the ghosts of his family and wrote *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, the supreme American play. (Is family *the* great theatrical subject? The *Oresteia*, *Hamlet* . . .) O'Neill's associations with theatrical groups, however congenial once, were long behind him. He wrote alone, as all good writers must, even playwrights. They can, like Shakespeare and Chekhov, be blessed in having to hand a symbiotic producing organism. But at last they write alone.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

The sitter in history

by Creighton Gilbert

A book's title, especially when the author's name has not been encountered before, generates expectations about what will be found inside. In the case of Lorne Campbell's *Renaissance Portraits*,[1] what one discovers upon first turning the pages is so remote from what could have been anticipated that one's immediate response may be to dismiss it with irritation. The book leaves out many of the expected and perhaps obligatory things, including, for extreme example, any discussion of the *Mona Lisa*, which is mentioned only twice in the context of other matters. Yet if one sticks with the book, one finds that its unusual treatment of its subject is well worth registering. Indeed, one discovers that, despite its obvious quirkiness, it offers a well-based survey of some aspects of the subject that have been too little considered.

The large format and deluxe production raise certain other expectations, and one is surprised to find the book is anything more than a tastefully modest coffee-table item. (An odd illustration of this modesty is that the publicity material understates the number of the reproductions—there are 267 of them—by nearly fifty.) Of the many and superior color plates, a dozen constitute a distinctive subgroup, details of the heads from larger portraits, which are bled, i.e., printed all the way out to all four margins. The device creates a feeling of large scale, suggesting actual size, and also something near the *trompe l'oeil* effect that dominates a reproduction of a painting when it fills a television screen. In this case the device also seems to heighten the biographical effect of the portraits: it's as if we were being given a social introduction to these people. All this is on top of the good evocation of the diverse brushwork as handled by the great artists represented in all these cases, from Holbein to Titian. Perhaps someone other than the author thought such images would have an instant appeal, for they are oddly concentrated near the beginning of the book, half of them in its first quarter, like good strawberries on the top of the box.

The credentials of the author set up yet another initial impression. The jacket flap describes him as Reader of Art History at the Courtauld Institute and the author previously of the catalogue of the Flemish paintings owned by Elizabeth II. He has also written impressive learned articles, chiefly on Flemish paintings. One therefore expects an art-historical text, most probably a chronological narrative with longer stops when the outstanding individual artists appear. It seems indeed that the traditional axioms of art history—which emphasize chronology and the importance of heroes as protagonists—have hardly been touched by the explosion of new methodologies in art history. Perhaps these axioms are unquestioned pre-

1 *Renaissance Portraits: European Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th, and 16th Centuries*, by Lorne Campbell; Yale University Press, 290 pages, $55.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

cisely by the people who make methodology their specialty, and so survive not so much surreptitiously as tacitly. The expected result would then be a book along the same general lines as the last well-known account of the same topic, produced by John Pope-Hennessy in 1966, perhaps emphasizing certain phases where the earlier author was held to have erred or left gaps.

To be sure, in the particular case of Renaissance portraiture, an objection to the normal scheme suggests itself, in that almost all the hero-artists discussed also produced non-portraits too, and in greater numbers. Hence to describe the series of their successive accomplishments without reference to the rest of their work tends to slice off a major part of each personality, unless so much reference is made to it as to undercut the theme. Campbell does not address any such procedural problems explicitly, but he does succeed in simply removing the issue in his own different scheme, downplaying both chronology and heroes in favor of the product—the portrait—as a special kind of made commodity. He also keeps a good deal closer to the visual specifics of the paintings than is usual either from biographers or users of the new procedures.

Campbell warns us at once that he will not give us "straightforward" history, and not very much about "chronological developments." His account of what will replace them is somewhat disappointing, truisms or Good Things such as defining types of portraits and "who produced them and for whom." We learn more when we observe particular cases. Among the nine short chapters, one surveys poses and another "settings, clothes and attributes." In the former, a quotation from a sixteenth-century painter who wrote a manual (one of many admirable such citations) first tells us to sit two yards away and hold a conversation; the author himself then gives us more along the same lines. The main trouble with three-quarter views, it seems, "lies in placing the near eye, for its relationship to the nose cannot be conveniently mapped by following well-defined contour lines and even a practiced draughtsman may place it too far from the nose." We are given hints for minimizing this difficulty and the next one, that hands "are of almost exactly the same high tone as the face." When we are told that "tables were serviceable for closing gaps in compositions," we are dealing with a smaller issue that also seems tied to a period. The others, however, are presented just as if they would be useful now. Portraits are thought of as being produced today, in essence of the same sort as in the Renaissance. No proof, we are told in an aside, is needed for the "obvious" point that in Europe since classical times "the same gestures and expressions have always made the same emotional signals." One may be skeptical about that when one thinks of how divergent they can be in the same era, our own, in different countries.

The author is very open about how he arrived at this approach. He grew up in the "portrait painter's household" of his father, and from him got all kinds of experience, including a sitter's. Thus the book at once suggested to me the kind of operator's handbook I had seen shortly before advertised as "offering design professionals everything they need to know about"—in this case —"airport terminals." Only after the above was written was I neatly rewarded with the perfect analogue, an announcement of the reissue of *Practical Portrait Painting*, a book by Frank Slater, a "distinguished British portraitist." This book, first published in 1949, is evidently perceived by its publishers as having lost nothing of its practicality. Slater, the announcement tells us, will assist not only on technique but career planning and "first, second and third sittings." Sure enough, so does Campbell. Taking up the problem of the bored sitter, whose facial expression may regrettably reappear in the portrait, he comes to the *Mona Lisa*, as mentioned. He cites the oft-quoted description by Vasari of how Leonardo brought in musicians and jesters to keep her cheerful, "and remove that melancholy which painting usually gives to portraits." As usually quoted, Leonardo's behavior seems peculiar

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and unmotivated, a token of his eccentric thoroughness. Campbell gives it context and sense, and this suggests how his apparently unhistorical approach can be enlightening, clarifying a dynamic circumstance in a way that neither the standard nor the trendiest methods would. One could continue beyond in Campbell's line of thought, asking whether a still unstated cause of the *Mona Lisa*'s fame, especially the fame of her smile, may be that sitters hardly ever come before us with smiles, and, still further, whether that rare smile may itself have generated the story that the portrait painter Vasari told, to explain it, rather than the other way around. To be sure, one predecessor of Leonardo, Antonello da Messina, does present many smiling sitters; Campbell does not speak of these.

As Frank Slater is also English, Campbell's book and this whole approach to portrait painting may seem to emerge from a unique local background. It is well known that in England Renaissance painting at its best was dominated by portraiture as it was nowhere else, most obviously with Holbein. The same pattern continued there with van Dyck in the seventeenth century and with Gainsborough and others in the eighteenth. Still later traces of this situation have been limited and peculiar but powerful. When one thinks about it, the existence of a National Portrait Gallery, as founded in 1857 in London, is quite peculiar. It has had no influence in other countries apart from close copies in Scotland and the United States. It does not contain the finest portraits produced in the nation, which would make it congruent with a book like Campbell's, but specifically those representing publicly important people. It thus is a museum of historical documents, and other countries place such portraits in their history museums in company with other kinds of artifacts. But because it installs its paintings exactly as do other galleries, a portrait gallery uniquely claims them as art objects too. Such galleries are a survival from Campbell's period; the lucky Renaissance artist did indeed produce virtually all his work for non-aesthetic uses in his society, in this case to glorify important people, but at the same time could be the beneficiary of praise if he was judged to be at the top in the aesthetic quality of his products.

Today we have almost entirely lost the former function of painted portraits (even artists are glorified in photographs) and keep only the aesthetic value in isolation. But there is a suggestion here that portraiture in England is a fossil exception. People who do official portraits there as their specialty, even in our century, are assigned a role in the world of art; following Gerald Brockhurst, there is Pietro Annigoni, who has nothing in common with Holbein, van Dyck, and Winterhalter other than the particularity that they were all foreigners whose fame turned on doing the English royal family. In America and I think elsewhere those who specialize in portraits of the prominent are outside the art world, declassed with commercial artists. More interesting in England is the subtler case of a Graham Sutherland, who was called on because he was a prominent artist when especially important prominent portraits were wanted, and still more so the way in which many British modernists in our century intersect with the traditional schemata of portraits in their chief work: Gwen and Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis, Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon, David Hockney. There is a thinner such tradition in Germany, and in both cases the basis is a continuum from the sixteenth century. Thus Campbell's sense that his scholarship about that period, emphasizing Protestant northern Europe, could involve a continuum to the present was a just instinct, though it would not have been anywhere else.

The only other case I can think of where portraits, publicly shown, have been isolated in their own gallery, is the Uffizi collection of self-portraits, acquired from artists since the end of the Renaissance. That brings us to the fact that self-portraits are entirely omitted from Campbell's survey of portraits. When he gives us a list of types of sitters to portraits, it extends to the artist's friends but not to the artist. What this confirms is Campbell's slight

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

interest in the individuality of those who paint portraits, and his focus on portrait painting as a "practical" functioning job. Even in dealing with other sitters, he is sparse on their psychology as it may be inferred from the images—a favorite theme of other writers on portraiture, so the omission, when psychology is most obviously involved, is not surprising.

The only two self-portraits that seem to be mentioned are both double portraits of the artist and his wife, thus at once involving another sitter, and they are typically brought up in a discussion of the problem of the market value of portraits when the sitter is not, or is no longer, the buyer. It is reasonable indeed to be puzzled, as the author puts it, about "who the people were who bought" the engraving in which, around 1490, Israhel van Meckenem represented his wife and himself side by side. Campbell's reasonable point is that this is, by far, the earliest self-portrait in a multiple medium, so implying that, unlike other self-portraits, it had an outside audience. Yet as today printmakers use their own art to produce Christmas cards for their friends, this engraving might have had the sitters' personal circle as its audience; the double oddity of its being a print and including the wife would thus be explained, but perhaps this explanation is too nonprofessional to appeal to the author. The second case involves the anonymous Master of Frankfurt, seen with his wife in an oil, one of a series of double portraits treated by Campbell as a class of their own. The author wants to show that the Arnolfini double portrait by Jan van Eyck is not so unusual as is generally thought, in several respects. Here his listed evidence seems uncharacteristically shaky.

Some of his examples are brief descriptions of lost works, and the two persons seen in them might well have had separating internal frames, while others, such as an image of Joan of Arc kneeling before the Dauphin, are only called portraits by dint of definitional generosity. Unlike portraits, narrative scenes present persons in an active interrelationship at a specific time; portraits consistently resemble religious icons in that they do not involve a point in time but show an ongoing stable existence. The role of time in Renaissance imagery is rarely explored. For that matter, the author never tells us how he wants to define "portrait," but only gives us thorough explanations of the inadequacies of many other definitions, not including the one just suggested. Perhaps here again he is better on the particular than on theory. Yet it is odd that he does give us a clear definition for the other word in his title, "Renaissance," which many people would find harder to do.

In general, Campbell impresses one with the equanimity of the sober craftsman. This equanimity deserts him on occasion, however, notably when he refers to those who since the time of Michelangelo and Vasari have been "saying or implying that portraiture is not a serious intellectual pursuit and that, as mere representation, it is scarcely worthy of being called an art form." Their views are said to have had a "fatal" effect because they imposed Florentine theoretical standards on German and Netherlandish portraiture.

This judgment, recalling Svetlana Alpers, is a relatively rare appearance of an explicit form of the ethnic separatism which, I have been suggesting, is a major underlying force in the book. It surfaces again in the final short chapter, called "Italy and the North." Florentine ideas of what art ought to be are found to have dominated unreasonably, to the disadvantage of the different kind of art found in the Netherlands and Germany. The latter is not simply accumulative naturalism, but has its own expressive distortions for effect, perhaps more so than in Italy. These the author exemplifies beautifully. What he does less well here is specify what the evil Florentine theory said. Indeed, Florentine theory is for Campbell and others a kind of straw man, a construct they invoke only to discredit.

Typically, the case is chiefly made by citing two individual portraitists, Titian and Anthonis Mor. Mor's achievement "has been dismissed by art historians as a superficial and provincial" imitation "of Titian" by those who have "ignored or dismissed as irrel-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

evant" Titian's copying from northern portraits. Finding this reading not familiar, I checked a book of my own that discusses both artists. I find that I had, duly, recorded Titian's taking of a portrait design from an Austrian colleague and had also, several times, including on that same page, praised Mor for his inventiveness and general distinction. I had also cited Mor's base in Antwerp for its central, non-provincial, role at the time. Since my book is among rather few whose theme required it to address both painters, it would seem to provide a suitable check. No doubt someone has made the foolish remarks described, but to treat them as the norm does not seem wise.

Even if Campbell pushes a claim to a point unlikely to help his cause when he judges Mor to be "unjustly overshadowed by Titian," he is welcome and well based in his urgent arguments that we look more keenly at Mor. A typical passage first describes such details as the narrow shadows, one, "between the ear and the near cheek, well defined and linear," leading unexpectedly to the projection of "an incipient sneer," while other equally specific technical means produce "an expression of subtle and aristocratic disdain." When so much art history that claims a reforming mission sees its images only in large generalities, apparently because it needs them only instrumentally, Campbell's close looking puts other observers who will follow his pointers into his debt, even before he makes his evocative jumps to argue how the design generates the expression.

Looking at his handsome plates of Mor, and at an original, I have been reinforced in an old formula of my own that one might define Mor's triumph, especially in a "classic" like his *Mary Tudor*, as the making of the sort of image that is ideally suited for a frontispiece to a biography of the sitter. Titian's are not, they are too breathing and of the living moment. Mor's beautiful adjustment of his composed bodies inside their rectangles gives his people a stability, seasoned by refinements mentioned and the three-quarter view, that may persuade us that he has summed them up, both in their personal existence and their social slots. The slot, as the author observes, is usually one with power and wealth. He is careful to suggest that accidents of survival can have skewed the ratio of Renaissance portraits linked to powerful people, and that in a way that is not accidental at all since the less powerful are less likely to have survived. Yet portrait paintings were always expensive (a factor surprisingly only glanced at in the book), and may themselves have tended to be in the first place records made chiefly about the rich.

The Arnolfini portrait, as mentioned above, sets up another of the author's few and thus conspicuous departures from equanimity. "With some confidence" he rejects the very frequent view that it contains many symbolic references and is anything but a "straightforward double portrait." With growing emphasis, he calls it "inadvisable" to find a reference to marriage in it, "still more inadvisable" to compare it to a "pictorial marriage certificate," and finally "an insult to van Eyck" to treat his picture as a puzzle to solve or a substitute for a contract. The reference, politely demoted to a footnote, is to a well-known essay by Erwin Panofsky, which really didn't do that. Panofsky found symbols and found them puzzling, but did not reductively equate the picture with a puzzle or a paper document—in his phrasing a high charge belongs to the first word of the phrase "*pictorial* marriage certificate." Certainly, less sensitive (and less learned) admirers of Panofsky have behaved in a way that could well be described in the author's angry tones, making the image only an illustration of a cultural notion, but a case is not proved by scoring off its weaker proponents any more than by misgauging its stronger ones.

Renaissance Portaits, then, betrays its author's idiosyncratic approach more conspicuously than most books do both because of Campbell's blunt honesty—something of a John Bull bluntness at times—and because his biases aren't the conventional ones of either standard or rebellious art history. It is probably this idiosyncrasy that generates the book's exceptional usefulness.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Racconti italiani

Kathrine Jason, editor and translator
Name and Tears and Other Stories:
Forty Years of Italian Fiction.
Graywolf Press, 231 pages, $17.95

reviewed by Sam Tanenhaus

Apart from the work of three celebrated writers—Italo Calvino, Primo Levi, and Umberto Eco—what do most of us know about contemporary Italian fiction, about its trends, its techniques, its obsessions? *Name and Tears*, a collection of short stories edited and translated by Kathrine Jason, is an ambitious attempt to fill us in. Jason tells us in her introduction that hers "is the first anthology of Italian fiction to appear in twenty years." For this reason

> I wanted to present an overview of the period between 1945-1985. My basic premises for inclusion of stories were these: first, to include those writers whose contributions have been considered of major importance; secondly, to choose stories that have not appeared previously in English translation; and finally, to favor recent work, especially in the case of older writers, like Moravia, whose careers may span more than five decades.

We're in trouble from the start. Jason, however fluent she may be in Italian, is not on easy terms with her native tongue. Note, among other infelicities, the odd progression from "first" to "secondly" to "finally," the imprecise phrasing (is this anthology the first to appear in any language or only in English?), and the obfuscations of the passive voice ("writers whose contributions have been considered of major importance"). Does "contributions" refer to the selections included in this volume or to each author's entire corpus? And who "considers" them important—other writers, critics, the reading public, the anthologist herself?

Jason's headnotes are no better. Of Dino Buzzati's clever parable about leprosy, "Something That Begins with 'L'" (1942), she remarks that "[t]he attitude described in [the story] is not unlike attitudes we have witnessed recently in our own culture." This isn't prose, it is talk, of the patronizing kind you hear on television before you switch the channel. Of Alberto Moravia she writes, "In his later work, he claims that psychological analysis and Marxism have helped him to portray contemporary life. Yet some critics think his openness to the ideological and cultural fashions explains the inconsistency of his work." Where was Graywolf's editorial staff? Someone should have flagged the clumsy repetition of "work" and the needless article before "ideological and cultural fashions"; someone should have alerted Jason that she has Moravia interrupting his novels to interpolate defenses of his literary method. I don't mean to nitpick, but Jason is not only the editor of these stories but also their translator, and if she has trouble forming straightforward English sentences what are we to assume about her capacity for using the language as a dependable conveyance for Italian?

Syntactic dishabille usually hints at some wider chaos, and so it does in *Name and Tears*. At a loss for a method, Jason offers, in its place, a string of excuses. We learn that she has snubbed Cesare Pavese on the ground that his "death in 1950 places him on the margins of the period covered by this anthology." Yet neorealism is a focal point of Jason's volume, and she acknowledges that Pavese was the movement's dominant figure. Her approach to Calvino is also puzzling. Jason had hoped to include a story that was new to readers of English but, if I understand her rightly, she was denied permission to do so by his publisher (either in Italy or the United States), who forced her to select a work that had already appeared in translation. Given the extent of the available stories, this left her a wide berth. Why, then, did she settle for "Adam, One Afternoon," a chestnut written in 1947 (long before Calvino became a major writer) and published repeatedly in English, first in 1957 as the title story of a Calvino collection issued in Great Britain, then in the 1983 reprint of that collection,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and yet again in 1984 as part of the volume *Difficult Loves*? Jason could easily have picked a story from Calvino's important period, which began in the 1960s and which played so decisive a role in shaping current fiction, not only in Italy but throughout the West.

Every anthology is, to some extent, an index of exclusion. And most of Jason's decisions are defensible. Besides, all we can rightfully expect is that she give us a sound arrangement, first-rate stories, and effective translations. I'll take these up in order.

Forty years of fiction is a great deal of ground to cover, particularly in the case of a literary culture as diverse, even diffuse, as Italy's historically has been. To do justice to its variety—to "present an overview," as Jason puts it—the anthologist must touch many bases. Here she deserves praise. Her range is wide: she has included, for example, both Carlo Emilio Gadda and Vasco Pratolini, who stand as far apart on the Italian spectrum as, say, Thomas Pynchon and Bernard Malamud do on the American.

The next task of the anthologist is to apply some perspective to the work. The conventional solution is to present the material chronologically, either by the year of the author's birth or by the year of each story's publication, so that the reader can trace a line of development. Not this time. Jason has arranged her selections *alphabetically* by author. The intent may have been democratic; the result is Dadaist. Guiseppe Pontiggia's "Publisher's Reader" (1979), a postmodernist bauble reminiscent of Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveler*, precedes Pratolini's "Vanda" (1957), an exercise in psychological realism. Eco's "The Discovery of America" (1963), a noisy parody of telejournalism, is bracketed by two somber examples of neorealism, Carlo Cassola's "At the Station" (1942) and Beppe Fenoglio's "The Boss Doesn't Pay." You'll observe that I've put no date after this last story. The reason is that Jason herself hasn't provided one, though she has furnished a numerical red herring, 1973, the year "The Boss Doesn't Pay" appeared in a posthumous collection of Fenoglio's work (he died in 1963). Since "The Boss Doesn't Pay" concerns World War II partisans, it's a safe guess, but only a guess, that it was written in the 1940s. Trickier yet is dating the title story, the very last in the collection, by Elio Vittorini. Jason's headnote says it was composed "under the constraints of fascist censorship," but the only date we're given there is 1971, when "Name and Tears" was included in a posthumous collection (Vittorini died in 1966). If you happen to turn back to the introduction, you'll find that Vittorini wrote the piece in the 1930s. The effort of sorting through these clues almost diverts us from the curious fact that Jason has singled out a story written in the 1930s as the title selection of an "overview of the period between 1945-1985."

It occurred to me, as I worked out these twisters, that *Name and Tears* belongs to a new genre, the anti-anthology (antithology?). Can it be, for instance, that the alphabetic system is merely a ruse, that Jason's objective was to place the title story, which is also the oldest, at the end of the volume, so that we would read the book back to front? Or perhaps, more ambitious still, she wants each reader to invent his own contrapuntal version of literary history. Either way, she asks too much. Far fewer readers will enjoy the aleatory aspect of Jason's collection than will conclude from it that Italy's literature is as anarchic as its recent political history, an *opera buffa* of melodious names, fleeting alliances, and eccentric fringe players.

In truth, Italian politics operates within a framework of relative stability, and its literature does too. What's more, Jason knows it. Her introduction ably summarizes general trends in recent Italian fiction—the experimentalism of the 1960s; the influence of French literary theory in the 1970s; the "metafictions" of the 1980s—and sensibly links this expansionism to the "miracle" of the country's postwar economic boom. But for some reason she hasn't let her knowledge influence the design of her book. If a chronological arrangement wouldn't do, why didn't she try out another plan? She could have put

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the neorealists in one section, the psychological realists in a second, the theoretical writers in a third.

The selections themselves are, in one sense, admirable. Jason has squeezed in a vast number of writers, so many, in fact, that she herself has lost count. She puts the figure at twenty-seven; actually, it's twenty-six. No matter, it's a lot, and because some writers are represented twice, the selections total thirty-one. This is overkill. What happened to the days when Randall Jarrell gathered up *Six Russian Short Novels* and crammed them into 350 densely packed pages? *Name and Tears* barely tops 230, and there are blank sheets scattered throughout. Many of the stories are only four or five pages long; it is the rare work that reaches double figures. More to the point, few of these stories are stories at all, either in the old-fashioned sense (strong narrative, well-drawn characters) or in the contemporary sense (miniature construct, verbal harmonies). The older entries tend to be thin and dull, the newer ones facetious and overstated.

The quality is so poor, on balance, that it left me wondering if today's descendants of Boccaccio have lost touch with their noble patrimony. I consulted my bookshelves and found another collection—it is cited in Jason's introduction—the Penguin *Italian Short Stories* of 1965. This modest book, part of the "Parallel Text" series, includes only eight stories; it is designed primarily as a language aid, with pages of Italian facing literal English cribs. The authors are well known; seven of the eight also appear in Jason's anthology. But the entries in *Italian Short Stories* are uniformly good, and two are truly superb—one by Pratolini, whose effort in *Name and Tears* is much weaker, the other by Pavese. And each story in the anthology runs about ten pages.

It may seem silly to criticize these short stories for being short. Indeed I resisted it myself until I came upon the prize of Jason's collection, Anna Maria Ortese's "A Pair of Glasses" (1967). At fifteen pages, it is the second-longest story in the book, and by far the best. Like Calvino's "Adventure of a Nearsighted Man," it transforms spectacles into an instrument for perceptual awakening. Ortese's heroine is a young Neapolitan slum girl, nearly blind, who is taken by her mother to the posh office of an optometrist. He fits her with test lenses and instructs her to look out the window:

> Well-dressed people, so many of them, passed before her on the sidewalk, and they were crystal clear even if smaller than usual: ladies in silk suits and powdered faces, young men with long hair and colorful sweaters, an old man with a white beard and reddened hands clasping a cane with a silver handle; and in the street, beautiful automobiles that looked like toys, painted shiny red or light green; and green trolleys as big as houses. Across the street, the elegant stores whose windows shone like mirrors (sales clerks in black smocks were polishing them) were so full of fine things that Eugenia's heart swelled. There was a cafe with red and yellow tables outside, and young girls with golden hair sitting cross-legged laughed as they drank from tall, colored glasses. Above the cafe, balcony doors stood ajar, as it was already spring; the embroidered curtains blew, revealing blue and gold paintings, heavy gold and crystal chandeliers that glittered.

Back in her family's bleak flat, Eugenia awaits the arrival of the new eyeglasses, so excited she ignores her mother's bitter protest about their expense ("Eight thousand lire!"). When the glasses arrive, she slips them on, only to see, with painful clarity, the true lineaments of the world she is doomed to inhabit. It is an exquisite story, heartbreaking, inventive, marvelous in its details.

It is also competently, if not elegantly, translated. Here, at last, is the good news. Jason knows Italian and converts it, much of the time, into an English more flexible than the one she employs in her introduction and headnotes. In the future she should dedicate herself to translation's honorable art and let someone else guide American readers through the *selva oscura* of modern Italian letters.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The writer and the Word

Alfred Corn, editor Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament. Viking, 361 pages, $19.95

reviewed by C. H. Sisson

At the beginning of this book is a page blank but for four names: Simone Weil, W. H. Auden, Flannery O'Connor, and Robert Fitzgerald. Not a dedication but a reminder: perhaps these are people Alfred Corn would have liked to ask to contribute to his collection. The actual contributors—twenty-three including the editor himself—are either novelists, or poets, or both, and a number of them are—for whatever that may signify in terms of currency—winners of literary prizes or contributors to *The New Yorker*. Several of them are, or have been, teachers of creative writing. In general, they may be said to represent no fugitive or cloistered virtue but rather literary practices more or less tolerated in our age.

There must be readers who will think this an odd quarter to go to for illumination on the subject of *Incarnation*. The authors in question have in common, however, a peculiarity by no means taken for granted in the literary world of the second half of the twentieth century: each of them has been willing to make public his or her reflections on one or another book of the New Testament, in furtherance of providing an answer to the editor's question: "Just what is the importance of these ancient scriptures to contemporary imaginative writing?" It might be thought that there is a certain condescension in this question, which suggests that the reader may be expected to trust the discoveries of the contemporary literary imagination more than the original texts. Such readers are perhaps not uncommon, but one does not have to be a fundamentalist to think such a view fallacious, if only because texts which have lodged for nearly two millennia somewhere near the center of the Western mind are *ipso facto* more important than the best of our current productions. What emerges is twenty-three bits of impressionistic criticism—not itself an enduring form of literature—which must throw some light on the current confusions, or add to them.

Alfred Corn's introduction starts with some impeccable reasons for distrusting fundamentalists. "One of the disturbing things," he says, ". . . is that they seem not to read the Bible enough, or not comprehensively. Seizing on one verse or chapter and letting everything follow from that suggests a lack of perspective. It ignores the careful balance established among a series of books composed by different hands over roughly a forty-year period in the second half of the first century." Quite so. But this insistence on context tells against the editor's own device of seeking the reaction of individual writers to isolated books. Some sense of a wider context is implicit in all criticism, but the books of the Bible are inescapably a special case. It is impossible to read them without rousing memories not only of other texts but of the ways they have been read for so long, and this goes for the most un-churched as for the Pope of Rome. Their history is part of their meaning. Indeed, all our history is part of their meaning, and beside this unknowable bulk any individual reaction is of almost infinitesimally small importance.

It must be said that this difficulty is seen with more or less clarity by all the contributors to this volume, not least, of course, the editor himself. The bits of autobiography which many of them let slip are illuminating. Corn describes a vision he had some eight years ago when, as a "self-described atheist," he "was taking a walk in the Grove Street cemetery in New Haven . . . out enjoying the pink-and-white blossoms on the cherry trees." Armed in the best late-twentieth-century manner with a portable player, he sat down on one of the flat tombstones and put on "a tape cassette of Bach keyboard music."

> And suddenly I knew with complete certainty that the world and everything in it was a Creation, so complex as by contrast to simplify the Bach fugue into a child's bare, unaccompanied nursery song.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Corn's account of this occasion disposes any suspicion his introduction may have given rise to that he entered upon the compilation of the volume with no more reflection than is required to set on foot a slightly trendy literary exercise. His reference to himself at the time as a "self-described atheist" might be intended to suggest that our descriptions of ourselves are not to be relied upon, but does not that in turn cast a doubt on the validity of the subjective method on which the book is constructed?

Corn has found a home in the American Episcopal Church "where the inherited strands of Catholicism and Protestantism both are active and in fruitful dialogue." Whatever point of belief or incredulity other contributors may find themselves in at the time of writing their pieces, there can be no doubt about the part their respective upbringings have had in forming their orientations. It is not the nature of the homework the editor set them to give us much in the way of information about the diverse journeys which are hinted at, and it is no doubt as well that invitations to so many novelists and poets did not offer them the temptation of competing with St. Augustine. "Not all of the contributors are practicing Christians, or even theists," the introduction tells us. "Two of them are Jews who had important comment to offer on these texts or on Christianity at large." The diversity of starting point has more significance here, not surprisingly, than the diversity of the writers as *writers*. Robert Hass has "shed his Catholicism," but it remains abundantly clear that it is Catholicism that he has shed. Rita Dove starts from an African Methodist Episcopal establishment, and ends with an insistence that "anyone who feels the need to connect the outside world with an interior presence must *absorb* the mysterious into the tangle of contradictions and longings that form each one of us." Amy Clampitt tells us of her beginnings in "a little country church" of "a community [which] had been settled by members of the Society of Friends (or Quakers) . . . who in a welter of late-nineteenth-century evangelism had lost track of precisely who they were." John Hersey still finds that what "would not do for [his] Social-Gospel parents . . . won't do for their agnostic son."

It seems to me that the interest of this volume lies rather in the impressions it contains of the impact of Christianity at large than in any comments on particular books of the New Testament, worthy of attention as some of those comments certainly are. Perhaps that is not quite the way to put the matter. Christianity is hardly at large: the light it gives may rather be said to glimmer or blaze within whomever it does glimmer or blaze for a longer or shorter time. Yet there is a sense in which our limited shreds of perception of this mystery—for it is surely a mystery or nothing—walk up and down the world seeking whom they may devour, or whom they may bite to open a crack through which light can flow. It would be wrong to expect more from even the most hopeful contributors; I find myself unable to judge whether we should expect as much.

The question remains whether there can be any special function for novelists and poets, as a class, in this uncertain process. One can speculate only on the literary consequences of such an attempt as is here made to define such a function. There is a presumption which is not altogether reassuring in Larry Woiwode's suggestion that there is, in Acts, "a packed concision" which "is a forerunner of writing of the kind we won't witness in its full-blown application until our own stark, purged fiction of the twentieth century." Dana Gioia, for all the creditable caution of his approach to Philippians, is surely on the way to imperilling his literary integrity when he talks as "a poet writing about the New Testament." He worries about the reader's "lifetime of preconceptions" and in a particular sense those of his audience, "including most American intellectuals," for whom the New Testament "is a great moral document in which great truths are unfortunately tangled up with discredited supernatural legend." And he is surely making a display of literary airs in sug-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

gesting that "imaginative writers" like himself are able to bring an unusual "innocence and humanity" to the understanding of Paul, and in attributing to the writer's imagination "its higher sense of the intuitive discovery of reality."

Yet this last portentous phrase of Gioia's goes to the root of the problem with which this volume confronts us. In our day "writer," whether imaginative or not, is primarily a trade category, and "writing" flourishes, as a trade, as never before in recorded history. Where is one to draw the boundaries of "imaginative writing"? Does it include advertising copy? Some advertising copywriters are as imaginative as some novelists. Does it include the endless rubbish put out night and day under the title of plays, reminiscences of alleged "experiences," songs, and, not infrequently, of "news"? If "imagination" has a "sense of the intuitive discovery of reality," where does lying begin? Is the vast trade world of "poetry" itself free of it? Is the business of teaching "creative writing"? Is "literary criticism" untainted? If imagination opens the mind to reality what becomes of our criteria of truth? And what are those criteria? The question is as old as human debate, and will be asked as long as the world lasts.

It is the recognition of this dilemma which is at the bottom of all religion, and the exponents of religions are no more free than the rest of mankind from the temptations of mere plausibility. The New Testament—or more properly the whole of history which begins with the first chapter of Genesis—stands at the center of the most persistent attempt made, in the Western world, to account for the human condition. The "personal responses" in which the editor is primarily interested certainly illustrate that condition. Can they do more? He asserts, with impeccable orthodoxy, "that the practice of sacrifice, at the small scale and the large, is central to any valid 'imitation of Christ.'" The volume as a whole suggests that an appropriate sacrifice, "at the small scale," would be the vanity of authors—and not only those represented in this book.

Victorians' secrets

A. S. Byatt Possession: A Romance. Random House, 555 pages, $22.95

reviewed by Donna Rifkind

One of the curiosities of 1990 in the publishing world was the popularity of a novel by the British writer A. S. Byatt entitled *Possession*. In October it was announced that Miss Byatt's novel (her fourth) had won the Booker Prize, England's most prestigious literary award. At the same time came news that Miss Byatt had also picked up the Irish Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize. Together, the two awards netted the author just a bit under ninety thousand dollars and a good deal of priceless publicity. In this country, the book remained for weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list, was universally praised by critics, and occupied a prominent position on just about every roundup of the most distinguished books of the year.

Possession marks a departure from Miss Byatt's previous novels—*The Virgin in the Garden* (1978), say, or its sequel, *Still Life* (1985)—which are big, messy, plot-heavy books, full of somber theoretical reflections on life and art, religion and society. These books owe a clear debt to the fiction of Iris Murdoch (one of Miss Byatt's nonfiction works is a study of the older novelist entitled *Degrees of Freedom*) and are, like Miss Murdoch's novels, absorbing while read but forgettable once they are finished. That a good deal of *Still Life* takes place at Cambridge is not surprising: the university is clearly a world Miss Byatt knows well, having taught English and American literature at University College, London.

While *Possession* can be called a university novel as well, it has a distinctly new focus, concentrating less on traditional plotting and more on literary game-playing. Subtitled "A Romance," the novel takes its epigraph from the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables*. In writing a romance, Hawthorne noted, the goal is "to connect a bygone time

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

with the very present that is flitting away from us." The writer of a romance, he continues, "wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel."

Miss Byatt's novel assumes latitude galore, especially in the way it attempts to connect a "bygone time" and the "very present." Half the book tells the story of a secret love affair between two well-known British Victorian poets of Miss Byatt's imagination: Randolph Henry Ash, who bears some resemblance to Robert Browning, and Christabel LaMotte, a demure figure somewhat reminiscent of Emily Dickinson, whose poetry is, in the late 1980s, enjoying a widespread popularity among modern scholars. The other half of the plot concerns a cadre of contemporary academics, each of whom is intent on uncovering the details of the love affair for his or her own professional glory.

"Latitude" of some sort also shows itself in Miss Byatt's re-creation of the art of her fictional Victorian poets. Not content merely to have her modern scholars rave about its quality (though they do plenty of this), she invents pages and pages of poetry, prose, diaries, and letters by Ash and LaMotte in order to give readers a look at the primary material that has all of her academics gaga over their subjects' private life.

Many reviewers of *Possession* have lavishly praised these inventions. The poetry struck Jay Parini in *The New York Times Book Review* as "highly plausible versions of Browning and Rossetti and . . . beautiful poems on their own." But it must be said that, whatever Miss Byatt's familiarity with the genre, she is deplorably inept at creating imitations of important Victorian poetry. Here, for example, is a brief quotation from Ash's 1840 pseudo-epic *Ragnarök*, a twelve-book poem (mercifully, in this case we are only given four pages) "which some saw as a Christianizing of the Norse myth":

> And these three Ases were the sons of Bor
> Who slew the Giant Ymir in his rage
> And made of him the elements of earth,
> Body and sweat and bones and curly hair,
> Made soil and sea and hills and waving trees,
> And his grey brains wandered the heavens as
> clouds.

Christabel LaMotte's poetry, while no better, generally has at least the virtue of brevity. Here is a representative bit of banality that serves as the introduction to Chapter 8:

> All day snow fell
> Snow fell all night
> My silent lintel
> Silted white
> Inside a Creature—
> Feathered—Bright—
> With snowy Feature
> Eyes of Light
> Propounds—Delight.

If Miss Byatt's intention had been to offer these "poems" as parodies of nineteenth-century literature at its worst, they might perhaps have had some narrative punch. But she presents them unsmilingly, without so much as a hint of irony, as if they were comparable to "Porphyria's Lover" or "Fra Lippo Lippi."

The parody in *Possession* is reserved for easier targets: the contemporary scholars who are squabbling over the literary remains of Ash and LaMotte. The academic treated most kindly—if not unsatirically—by Miss Byatt is her hero, Roland Michell, a twenty-nine-year-old with a doctorate from Prince Albert College in London and a bleak future. (When a teaching job comes up in his department, there are six hundred applications.) Trained in "the post-structuralist deconstruction" of the poetry of Randolph Henry Ash, Roland now finds himself with no hope of employment, and spends his time doing donkey work for his former professor, an expert on Ash named James Blackadder.

Roland is keenly aware that he has missed the chance to reap the benefits of trendy literary scholarship in its heyday: gone is the time when an opportunistic academic could rise to superstardom. Yet against all odds,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Roland manages to make a major academic discovery one morning in the Reading Room of the London Library. Leafing through an overlooked copy of Vico from the Ash archives, he discovers two love letters written by Ash and deduces, after some research, that the object of Ash's illicit devotion must be Christabel LaMotte. For years it had been taken for granted among scholars that Ash was entirely faithful to his devoted wife Ellen, while Christabel thrived in what the feminists had been enthusiastically assuming was a happy lesbian relationship. So Roland's discovery, which he at first keeps entirely to himself, is decidedly momentous.

But Roland cannot continue for long on his own: he is familiar enough with Ash's life, but needs more information about LaMotte's. Rather reluctantly, he forms an alliance with Maud Bailey, a LaMotte expert who is herself an indirect descendant of the poetess. Together the two scholars sift through their combined archives in search of clues; step by step, in an atmosphere of mounting scholarly excitement, they uncover evidence for what turns out to have been a steamy sexual liaison which may or may not have resulted in the birth of an illegitimate child.

Before too long, however, other academics begin suspecting that something is up and scramble to join the chase. This pack of bloodhounds includes Mortimer P. Cropper, Ash's American biographer and curator of a huge archive of the poet's artifacts. Cropper drives a long black Mercedes and is known to be both unscrupulous and unbearably pompous; he is certainly meant to be regarded as a figure of fun, as is dour Professor Blackadder (Roland's mentor) and his office-mate Beatrice Nest, who has been dispiritedly trying to produce a volume of Ellen Ash's diary and letters for twenty-five years.

Miss Byatt lavishes most of her satirical attention on Professor Leonora Stern, a radical feminist at Tallahassee University who shares with Maud Bailey the distinction of being the world's foremost expert on Christabel LaMotte. Leonora is "a majestically large woman, in all directions," who claims both Creole and Indian ancestry. After chucking her first husband, "a happily meticulous New Critic [who] had totally failed to survive Leonora and the cut-throat ideological battles of structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, deconstruction and feminism," she bore a son to a hippie named Saul Drucker, then left him for an Indian woman professor of anthropology. "After the professor," notes Miss Byatt, "there had been Marge, Brigitta, Pocahontas and Martina."

However ridiculous this oh-so-contemporary personal history may appear to be, the most pointed lampooning in *Possession* is in its characterization of the novel's hero and heroine, Roland and Maud. Throughout the book we are teased into hoping that, in the process of uncovering the facts of a bygone love affair, Roland and Maud will have their own fling. But this repeatedly fails to happen, on purpose: Miss Byatt's intention here is to point out the irony in the fact that Ash and LaMotte, a pair of properly repressed Victorians, managed to be a lot sexier than today's sexually well-informed scholars. Although Roland and Maud are attracted to each other, they are utterly incapable of "any strenuous Romantic self-assertion":

> They were children of a time and culture that mistrusted love, "in love," romantic love, romance *in toto*, and which nevertheless in revenge proliferated sexual language, linguistic sexuality, analysis, dissection, deconstruction, exposure. They were theoretically knowing: they knew about phallocracy and penisneid, punctuation, puncturing and penetration, about polymorphous and polysemous perversity, orality, good and bad breasts, clitoral tumescence, vesicle persecution, the fluids, the solids, the metaphors for these, the systems of desire and damage, infantile greed and oppression and transgression, the iconography of the cervix and the imagery of expanding and contracting Body, desired, attacked, consumed, feared.

The most effective aspect of *Possession* is not its satire of contemporary academic war-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

fare, its literary self-consciousness, or the complexity of its detective-story plot, which ends melodramatically with all the scholars perched over Ash's grave in a storm, ready to exhume its surprising contents. Nor, finally, is it Miss Byatt's prodigious (and largely failed) attempts to imitate Victorian literary artifacts. The most effective thing—the only truly memorable thing, in fact—about this novel is its eloquent declaration of a single simple point: that Roland and Maud, highly trained specialists in the very latest theories about sexuality and the ego, do not know the first thing about finding sexual fulfillment for themselves.

And yet the convincing articulation of this very postmodern dilemma is not a satisfactory explanation for the widespread success of *Possession*. Roland's and Maud's is, after all, a most specialized kind of arrested love affair, one which requires a thorough knowledge of semiotics in order for all its ironies to be properly understood. The best that can be said of this novel is that it is a kind of intellectual cult book: instead of possessing the more popular appeal of a novel by David Lodge or Kingsley Amis, both of whom have written brilliantly about the foibles of academics, Miss Byatt's book has a far more segregated readership. It is hard to imagine, once the wheels of the publicity machine have ground to a halt, that *Possession* will be regarded as anything other than an outdated literary curio, and a rather overwrought one at that.

Shorter notices

Richard Perceval Graves Robert Graves: The Years with Laura, 1926-1940. Viking, 380 pages, $24.95

Robert Graves: The Years with Laura, 1926-1940 is the second installment of Richard Perceval Graves's three-volume biography of his uncle. *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic, 1895-1926* covered the poet's early years at Charterhouse and Oxford; his experiences at the front in France during World War I, where he was wounded and left for dead; his marriage to the artist and radical feminist Nancy Nicolson; and the publication of his first books of poems.

The new volume begins with Graves's departure, in January 1926, for Egypt, where he was to take up the post of Professor of English at Cairo University. He left Egypt six months later, describing the university (in a letter to T. S. Eliot) as "a beautifully constructed farce in the best French style and dangerous if taken in the slightest degree seriously." Along with his wife and children on that Egyptian journey was Laura Gottschalk (later Riding), the young American poet who had come to England to collaborate with Graves on a book about modern poetry. Their famous affair destroyed the Graveses' marriage, and led to one of the stormiest relationships in modern literary history.

The Years with Laura also charts the publication, in 1929, of *Good-bye to All That*, the autobiography in which Graves made his bitter adieu to his country. In Majorca, which was to be Graves's principal home for the rest of his long life, Graves and Riding formed, at first, a productive literary partnership. This attachment soon came to a messy and rancorous end, however; the final break precipitated by Riding's affair with Schuyler Jackson, an American journalist, and Graves's growing attachment to Beryl Hodge, whom he would shortly marry.

Richard Perceval Graves is a professional biographer: his previous subjects include A. E. Housman, the Powys brothers, and T. E. Lawrence. He is neither a literary scholar nor a critic, much less a poet, and his discussion of Graves's poetry is all but useless. Yet his non-literary account of his uncle's life in this volume has certain advantages. What is focused on in this book is not the "story" of the poems or of Graves's inner life, but the drama of a man doing everything in his power to reject his former habits, customs, friends, and country. The bitterness that marked Graves's departure for Majorca turns out to have been much greater than Martin Seymour-Smith, Graves's earlier biographer,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

had led us to believe. Richard Perceval Graves give us a more candid account of the destructive side of Graves's headlong effort to sever connections with every aspect of his former life.

Some readers, especially those who have sided with Graves in the celebrated Graves-Riding quarrel, are likely to find the gifted but manipulative and neurotic Laura Riding to be the main instigator of all of Graves's worst behavior. After all, she ruined Graves's marriage, drove a wedge between Graves and his four young children, alienated Graves from his family (especially his mother and sister Clarissa), and froze out such once-close friends as Siegfried Sassoon and T. E. Lawrence. And yet, what Richard Perceval Graves shows is that Graves was as much to blame for the mess as Riding. A heretofore unpublished letter from Clarissa to Robert effectively sums up the case against the poet:

> If you were prepared to allow your home to be broken up the first time you met a woman who was mentally more akin to you than your own wife, and if she agreed, then Laura was effect rather than cause.

This is, I think, the definitive judgment to be made about this important phase of Graves's life.

—*Robert Richman*

Charles Scribner, Jr. In the Company of Writers: A Life in Publishing. Based on the oral history by Joel R. Gardner. Scribner's, 193 pages, $22.50

In the late 1920s, when Charles Scribner, Jr., was but a boy, his father, the third successive Charles Scribner to head the family firm, took him on a tour of the Scribner printing plant. There, just a few blocks south of the Scribner offices and bookstore at 597 Fifth Avenue, sets of Henry James and Edith Wharton, and best-sellers by Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, not to mention the monthly *Scribner's Magazine*, were printed and bound and shipped out of town. "It was so big," remembers that boy, now almost seventy, "and there were so many people—It was an awesome experience for a child. It was a little frightening, too, to reflect that all this meant Scribners. I felt terribly diminished by the scope of the operation and the thought that I was expected to play some role in it. I was intensely aware that I was next in line."

This note, struck early on in Mr. Scribner's memoir, is characteristic of the book and of the man. Mr. Scribner tells his story with a becoming candor tinged with self-doubt and regret, and the story is a good one: a talented classics student (and wartime cryptanalyst) reluctantly turns down a fellowship at Princeton to take, at age twenty-five, the helm of a great American book house. His diffident father gives him no guidance, and the *de facto* head of the company, editor in chief Maxwell Perkins, is outraged by his lack of publishing know-how. ("[Perkins] once said to me, 'You've got to learn to like the books we do.' And I said to myself, 'Well, some day I'll do the books I like.'") Soon his father and Perkins are gone and he is left to pilot the firm alone, and at a time (1946-1986) when all the ground rules for success in publishing are changing.

Mr. Scribner's title, *In the Company of Writers*, suggests that his book is a collection of literary portraits. Indeed, it does contain a chapter called "My Life with Hemingway," a nerve-wracking account of Mr. Scribner's efforts not only to maintain but increase his most important writer's trust in the house. ("Working with Hemingway was rather like being strapped in an electric chair . . . it would need just the flicking of a switch to ruin me. I might do something quite innocently that would be taken amiss and I would be in outer darkness forever.") But readers coming to the book with hopes of new gossip about Thomas Wolfe, Marjorie Rawlings, or James Jones will be keenly disappointed, for these and other top Scribner writers are treated perfunctorily and only in passing. It is instead primarily a record of the author's tenure at Scribner's—and an odd sort of report card to himself. He is painfully honest about missed opportunities (not join-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ing the paperback revolution, not accepting Robert Giroux's overture to continue Scribner's tradition of literary publishing) and bad business moves (selling Scribner's large share of what would one day become Bantam Books, taking over the troubled publisher Atheneum). He regrets having had to oversee, and not having had the savvy to avoid, the sale of the printing plant, the bookstores, the warehouse, and, in the end, the company itself. But he also gives himself high marks for his innovations in the area of reference books ("the books I like"), including his development of *The Dictionary of Scientific Biography*. One can read this memoir as a comedy, in which the naïve hero, a would-be academic, bumbles as the head of a huge commercial venture not much to his liking, until, beefing up the reference-books division and surrounding himself with academics, he reconciles love and duty by re-creating the company in his own image—then sells the company to Robert Maxwell at a tremendous profit. But if it is a comedy, it is a comedy with a dark side, for although Mr. Scribner calls the story's ending a happy one, he also makes it clear that were he able to do it all over again—had he not been so "culpably ignorant" about his profession and had he found more joy in it earlier—Scribner's today would be quite a different entity, still fiercely independent and with something more behind its name than a glorious past.

—*Christopher Carduff*

Publisher's note: Back issues of *The New Criterion* are for sale at $5 each. A list of highlights is available upon request from the Office Manager.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notebook

Erich Heller, 1911-1990

by Joseph Epstein

I first came to know Erich Heller through his sometimes dark and always majestic essays—the essays in *The Disinherited Mind* and in *The Artist's Journey into the Interior.* One had only to read a few of these essays to recognize that he, Erich Heller, was one of those critics who was himself something of an artist. In his criticism he wrote a species of poetry—poetry in the sense in which, in his preface to his Lord Northcliffe Lectures, he himself defined poetry, as "any configuration of words such as have been written by Nietzsche or Thomas Mann, verbal compositions that, even without their aspiring to verse or rhyme, bear witness to the poetic faculty of man."

I first read those essays of Erich's roughly thirty years ago and was immensely impressed by them: by their elegance, by their learning, by their power, by the excitement with which he was able to imbue his dramatization of the ideas that stirred and shaped the writers who most interested him: Goethe, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Thomas Mann as well as Schopenhauer, Karl Kraus, Wittgenstein, and T. S. Eliot. It is perhaps only criticism of the kind Erich wrote, criticism that itself tells a story and is done in the spirit of the artist, that has any chance of attaining the standing of literature. Thirty years later, these essays of Erich's still seem immensely impressive.

Soon after I began teaching at Northwestern, in 1974, whenever a student would ask my advice about what courses to take, I would generally suggest a course by Erich Heller. One reason for this was that European teachers had been an important part of my own education at the University of Chicago, and I suspected that Erich would provide students with a substantial notion of the style and erudition of a European scholar and intellectual. In making these recommendations over the years, I never had an unsatisfied customer. The last student I know who took a course by Erich, a young man named Jason Karlawish, who is now in his last year at medical school, wrote to me in a letter of November 26:

> The passing of . . . Erich Heller caused me much grief. I shall never forget the man and his course [Introduction to European Literature, I believe]. He was one of those teachers who exerted influence that will last forever upon me. I miss him.

I did not myself meet Erich Heller until a year or so after beginning to teach at the university. A friend brought us together for lunch. Erich was most sociable, full of laughter and good will, and I noted the contrast between the darkness of the vision often implicit in his essays and the winning, quite cheerful quality of their author. Yet somehow no sparks of friendship ignited between us. It was only some years later, when we would occasionally meet at parties or events at the University of Chicago, that our friendship began to develop.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

It was on those twenty-mile rides from Hyde Park to Evanston that I began to discover that Erich was a very witty man, an amusing (and much amused) observer of American academic manners, and a man who loved to hear a joke and also loved to tell one. We discovered, too, that we, Erich and I, had a few things in common: a love of literature and a fascination with the biography of writers, a shared politics (we both thought Communism a very bad thing, a somewhat heretical view in American universities over the recent past decades), and a skeptical yet comic view of life. I also learned that Erich had genuinely elegant manners. He was, for one thing, a good listener, which is rare for a professor (among professors, a wag once remarked, there is no listening—only waiting). He was, for another, very generous in praising. He once told me in this connection that Thomas Mann, in his diaries, refers to praise as Vitamin P, and that Mann preferred to take it in large doses. It was a small point of very real pride with Erich to learn that Mann himself praised—in his diary—Erich's own writing about him in *Thomas Mann, The Ironic German.*

After his retirement from teaching, Erich and I used to lunch together every two weeks or so and he would sometimes dine at our apartment. By this point in his life, his body was beginning to close in on him. He had emphysema, problems (as he once put it to me with his customary delicacy) with his "internal arrangements," serious loss of hearing, and his eyesight had begun to fail, so that, I am told, he could not read for more than ten-minute stretches. These various illnesses greatly shrunk Erich's world: first he discovered that he could no longer take the European and Irish holidays he so much loved; then he discovered that, such was his body's need for steady medical surveillance, he had to move out of his apartment and into a retirement home where medical help was available on the premises but which was itself in many ways depressing; then it became clear that plans even for journeying out for an evening with friends had to be tentative at best, for he could not count on his health holding up for four of five days in a row. Although he was never a complainer, the penultimate time I was with Erich, when he lay in a hospital bed lashed to oxygen and intravenous-feeding machines, much fatigued by the incursions of his emphysema, he remarked to me, contemplating life without health, "I suppose it's not really worth it." But then, the student of German philosophy right up to the end, he added, "Yet I suppose Schopenhauer was right." By this I took him to mean that, however unreasonable the project of living might seem, the will overrode the capacity for reasoning, and so one lived on.

The sadness of Erich's having his world so drastically shrunk is that he was a most worldly man with a marked sense of *joie de vivre.* He was a man of London and New York, Weimar and Florence, Dublin and Cambridge, Mass. Among his dear friends were Hannah Arendt, Isaiah Berlin, Stephen Spender, worldly characters all. He had grown old enough to have influential and famous—even infamous—students: Martin Peretz, publisher of *The New Republic,* was one of Erich's students; so, too, was the late Paul de Man, whom Erich had taught when at Harvard. Harvard, the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford, the intellectual Upper West Side of New York, such places constituted Erich's favored milieu, or, as the novelist Josephine Herbst kiddingly used to call it, *maloo.*

Yet if Erich was in one sense worldly, in another sense there was something slightly Pninish about him. Like Vladimir Nabokov's memorable character Professor Pnin, Erich, one felt, was far from entirely at home in this country. I recall his once telling me about the horrific fear with which, as an émigré in the late 1930s, he faced the challenge of learning English. That he became the brilliant English prose stylist he soon became is testament to his intellectual power. I have even heard him accused of being a "popularizer," that most admirable of putative academic put-downs; what it really means, I have come to believe, is that one writes extremely well, which Erich of course did.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Although he used English elegantly, Erich never lost his accent, even after fifty years in England and America, and it remained strong until the end. This and his loss of hearing served to increase his Pninishness. Invariably, my telephone calls to him began thus:

"Erich, it's Joe."

"Tank you, tank you, tolerably vell," he would reply, guessing (wrongly) that I had inquired about his health, and we would be off on the wrong foot.

Hearing aids were a mixed blessing to Erich. He required them, but, when he wore them, some rooms were acoustically painful to him in their din. We used to look for restaurants where the food was good but that were not too noisy, not a combination easily found. We finally settled on one called Va Pensiero, across the street from his own residence. One o'clock, after the restaurant began to empty out, was our preferred time for meeting.

What did we talk about during those leisurely lunches? We talked a good deal about writing and writers. I had begun to reread the novels of Thomas Mann, which were a subject of unending interest to Erich, who, in *The Ironic German* and elsewhere, had written so well about them. (When one goes into the hospital, one takes along only those books one truly loves: on two different occasions when I visited Erich at the Evanston Hospital, his bedside books were much-used and badly battered German editions of *Joseph and His Brothers* and *Doctor Faustus.*) At these lunches we thoroughly analyzed the characters of colleagues as well as conjectured about the social relations of the intellectually famous. The vulgar might refer to this as mere gossip, and the vulgar would be right, except that it was fairly rich gossip. Erich much enjoyed gossip, and one of the memories I have of us together, before we had discovered the quietude of Va Pensiero, is of my almost yelling gossip to him in crowded restaurants.

I think that Erich enjoyed what I shall call here my forthrightness on the subject of writers, intellectuals, and academics about whom we were both equally dubious. It was always a point of pleasure to me, after having finished a fairly furious attack on some well-known intellectual's malfeasance, to hear Erich reply, tersely but reassuringly in accented English, "Qvite so." His own style in these sessions was not to show anger but to express puzzlement. How could it be that X could write such frightful gibberish? Why should Y wish to publish it? Can W not have known that this was the most patent nonsense? Who needs this sort of thing anyway? And then he would sometimes end by exclaiming, "Monstrous!" or "Fantastic!" Of most criticism written in the mode of the day, he would note, "Unreadable, of course. Absolutely unreadable."

But if Erich had true *joie de vivre*—loving companionship, literature, food, contemplation of the endless odd angularities of human nature—if he was a worldly man, in the best sense of the word, there was another sense in which he was not quite at ease in the world. Those who read his obituary in *The New York Times* might have noted that Erich had all these years retained his British citizenship. He once mentioned this to me, though he said nothing more about it. I have the suspicion that it had to do with his having been a refugee from the Nazis. To be a refugee, to be forced to seek refuge can never be easy, but my guess is that perhaps the most psychologically difficult position of all was to have been forced into this condition by the abominable Reich that claimed it would last a thousand years. To have been chased from one's home by the Nazis was to be rendered, in some part of one's soul, permanently nervous, always awaiting the knock on the door, the return of the brutes. One sees evidence of this in the behavior of the most worldly people. Even a woman supposedly as politically sophisticated as Hannah Arendt was said to have been sufficiently terrified by the prospect of the Republican Party nominating Barry Goldwater for president in 1964 boding the advent of fascism in America that she began searching for a new home in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Switzerland. A good friend of mine, another refugee from the Nazis, though otherwise utterly at ease with his Jewishness, decided, when his first and only son was born, not to have the boy circumcised at birth—the idea here being, well, you can never tell what test the boy might someday be put to. And Erich kept his British passport, which just might at some future time come in handy.

I think that when Erich was with his dearest friends, the handful of students who loved him and with whom he stayed in touch, or his brother Paul (the only member of his family who survived the Nazi death camps), he was at home in the world. I know that, viewed from the other side, the effect of being with him was to make the world always seem a more interesting, vivid, pleasurable place.

But I don't wish to close on a dark note, for Erich Heller, as I knew him, was a fundamentally bright and sunny man. A skeptic, true enough, but a laughing skeptic, much more in love with life than dubious about it. He was a kind and charming man, and his death marks a sad and serious subtraction from the richness of the world to those of us on whom he bestowed the generous gift of his friendship.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters

Poems for young people

To the Editors:
I hope that I am not too late in responding to Marya Zaturenska's wild claim in Robert Phillips's "Visiting the Gregorys" (September 1990) that the anthology *The Golden Journey: Poems for Young People*, which Louise Bogan and I edited, was copied from *The Crystal Cabinet*, edited by the Gregorys. From the beginning of our collaboration, Louise Bogan and I decided that we would not under any circumstances follow the practice of other anthologists and use the selections in other anthologies but would go directly to the books of the poets who interested us. *The Crystal Cabinet* was never mentioned and I doubt that Louise Bogan had ever seen it. The two collections that we both admired, but which we did not consult at the time, were *Come Hither* of Walter de la Mare and *The Cherry Tree* of Geoffrey Grigson.

William Jay Smith
Paris, France

Robert Phillips replies:
William Jay Smith misinterprets Marya Zaturenska's remark. When she stated in conversation to me that she felt the Smith-Bogan anthology, *The Golden Journey*, was an "imitation" of *The Crystal Cabinet*, edited by herself and Horace Gregory, she did not mean Smith and Bogan had plundered their anthology for poems. She simply meant that *The Crystal Cabinet* appeared in 1962 as "An Invitation to Poetry" (its subtitle) for young readers, and was illustrated with woodcuts; *The Golden Journey* appeared three years later, in 1965, subtitled "Poems for Young People," and was illustrated with woodcuts. Zaturenska concluded —rightly or wrongly—that the later book was fashioned on the model of her and Gregory's anthology. For my part, I am glad to own both, and have found refreshingly unfamiliar poems in each.

Poetry workshops

To the Editors:
In "Formal Poetry in the Land of the Free" (November 1990), Bruce Bawer leads us from the futility of a poetry workshop to an encomium on traditional verse forms. Unfortunately, Mr. Bawer arrives at an impasse about how his analysis might change such workshops. As for what creative-writing pedagogues seek in their students, Robert Burns prefigures it in his "Dean of Faculty": "In your servants this is striking—/ The more incapacity they bring, / The more they're to your liking."

Indeed, it is the pseudo-professionalism and artificial society of the workshops themselves that encourages conformity to turgid expression. As the young in America lack the social and family ties that would promote intimateness with individuality in their verse, the creative-writing hustlers have been able to make students write verses for *them*, in a public forum strikingly reminiscent of the Salem witchcraft trials. How enlightening!

To get the young to appreciate traditional verse

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

forms, perhaps we poets should designate the poetry workshop as an obscure phenomenon in social anthropology, then start from scratch. The workshops mainly offer a means for expression and reinforcement of narcissism, which is why uncontrolled free-verse soliloquies predominate in them. You can't teach a tradition this way, let alone artistic creation. Their prevailing sensibility, rampant careerism, is no substitute.

I will never forget the Victorian Studies graduate student who wandered into the first meeting of Derek Walcott's workshop at Harvard, claiming "it's unfair that only poets are allowed to study with other poets." I suppose the intrigue of "a secret society" is irresistible to the young, but this is not "a community of feeling." To create that, a poet must delve deeply in himself, his environs, and the literature he loves. You do not learn it in finishing school.

David Saemann
Wayne, NJ

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

Kate Chopin *by James W. Tuttleton*
Barnett Newman's big ideas *by Deborah Solomon*
Desmond MacCarthy *by Joseph Epstein*
Van Dyck in Washington *by Karen Wilkin*
Fredric Jameson's laments *by Roger Kimball*
Rolfe Humphries *by Ruth Limmer*
Derek Walcott's "Omeros" *by D. S. Carne-Ross*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

DEBORAH ROSENTHAL

NEW PAINTINGS
FEB 8 - 27 1991
BOWERY GALLERY
121 WOOSTER ST
NY NY 10012
212 226 9543
TUES - SUN 12 - 6

SEYMOUR LIPTON

BABCOCK GALLERIES

724 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019
212 786-1852 Fax 212 786-1857

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

William Bailey

Recent Work

February 9 - March 13, 1991

William Bailey; text by John Hollander and Giuliano Briganti, published by Rizzoli, will be available

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, Ltd.

50 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019
Tel: (212)765-3540 Fax: (212)541-4478

Exhibiting at The Art Show (ADAA) Booth #46

1 FEBRUARY – 2 MARCH 1991

Claire VanVliet

Toward 99 Views of Wheeler Mountain

Dolan/Maxwell *Philadelphia*

215, 665.1701 1701 WALNUT STREET

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

JIM McSHEA

new works

awarded 1989 ely schless harwood prize

first new york solo exhibition

january 30 through february 27

marilyn pearl gallery

420 west broadway ny 10012 tel 212 966 5506 fax 226 5157

RAUSCHENBERG

New Works

February 13 to March 7, 1991

Knoedler & Company

19 East 70 Street, New York Telephone (212) 794-0550

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

RIVERS
KLINE
RAUSCHENBERG
MITCHELL
REINHARDT
WARHOL
WESSELMANN
MOTHERWELL
STELLA

EDWARD
TYLER
NAHEM
FINE ART

56 EAST 66TH STREET
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10021
(212) 517-2453
FAX: (212) 861-3566

GRANTS
AVAILABLE

For individual,
professional artists
in the fields of painting,
sculpture and printmaking.

Write for application
materials to:

THE E.D.
FOUNDATION

P.O. Box 59
Ridgefield, N.J. 07657

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The Art Show

To benefit the Henry Street Settlement
Organized by the Art Dealers Association of America

Friday-Tuesday, February 15-19, 1991.
Preview: Thursday, February 14, 1991.
Seventh Regiment Armory
Park Avenue and 67th Street, New York City
Friday through Monday, Noon to 8 p.m.
Tuesday, Noon to 6 p.m. Admission: $10

Preview Events

Thursday, February 14, 1991

Benefactors Gala:
From 4:30 p.m. Ticket $500
One ticket, catalogue, and run-of-show pass

Patrons Reception:
From 6:00 p.m. Ticket $250
One ticket, catalogue, and one admission pass

Sponsors Reception:
From 7:00 p.m. Ticket $125
One ticket and catalogue

All Preview Events conclude at 9:00 p.m.

Lecture and Panels

Friday, February 15, 6:00-7:30 p.m.

More Taste Than Money: Recent Acquisitions By The Metropolitan Museum of Art
A slide-lecture by William S. Lieberman, Chairman, Department of 20th Century Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Monday, February 18, 6:00-7:30 p.m.

The Passion for Collecting
Moderated by Maureen Cogan, Chairman, *Art & Auction*
Panelists: Eli Broad, Collector, Contemporary Art; Agnes Gund, Collector, Contemporary Art; Raymond Learsey, Collector, Contemporary Art; Robert Lehrman, Collector, Contemporary Art

Tuesday, February 19, 2:30-4:00 p.m.

Art Dealers: Myth and Reality
Moderated by Gilbert S. Edelson, Administrative Vice President, Art Dealers Association of America
Panelists: Richard Gray, Richard Gray Gallery; Lawrence Rubin, Knoedler & Company; Holly Solomon, Holly Solomon Gallery; Richard Solomon, Pace Master Prints; Angela Westware, Sperone Westwater

Tickets $25 per lecture or panel
Includes one show admission (good at any time)

To order preview tickets, call (212) 766-9200 (and charge to American Express, Master Card or Visa)

To order Lecture and Panel tickets call ADAA, (212) 940-8925.

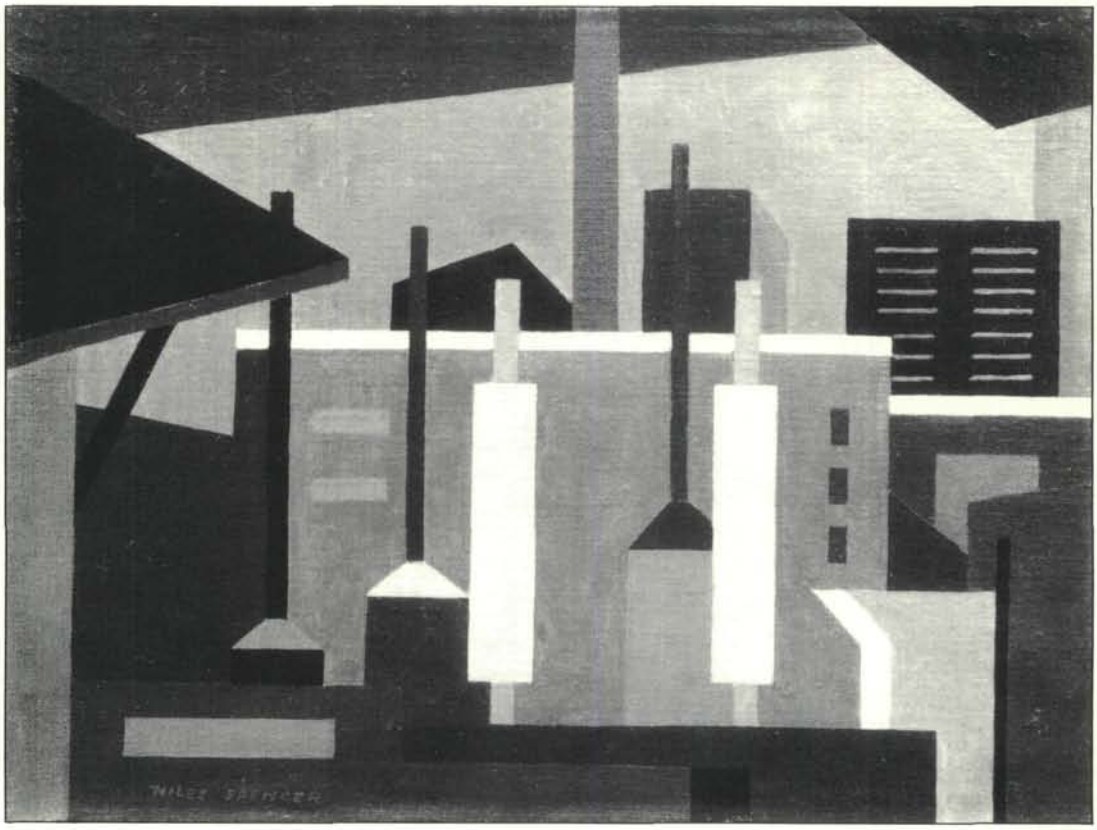
All proceeds benefit the Henry Street Settlement

Exhibitors

Didier Aaron, Inc.
ACA Galleries/ACA Contemporary
Acquavella Galleries, Inc.
Alice Adam Ltd.
Adams Davidson Galleries
Rachel Adler Gallery
Alpha Gallery, Inc.
Babcock Galleries
John Berggruen Gallery
Berry-Hill Galleries, Inc.
La Boetie, Inc.
Leo Castelli
Colnaghi USA Ltd.
Charles Cowles Gallery, Inc.
Maxwell Davidson Gallery
Tibor de Nagy Gallery
Terry Dintenfass, Inc.
André Emmerich Gallery
Rosa Esman Gallery
Richard L. Feigen & Co.
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, Inc.
David Findlay Jr. Fine Art
Forum Gallery
James Goodman Gallery
Graham Gallery
Richard Gray Gallery
The Greenberg Gallery
Stephen Hahn
The Harcus Gallery
Heath Gallery, Inc.
Nancy Hoffman Gallery
Hom Gallery
Leonard Hutton Galleries
Isselbacher Gallery
Sidney Janis Gallery
Kennedy Galleries, Inc.
Coe Kerr Gallery
Knoedler & Company
Barbara Krakow Gallery
Kraushaar Galleries
Janie C. Lee Master Drawings
Jeffrey H. Loria & Co., Inc.
Mary-Anne Martin/Fine Art
Barbara Mathes Gallery
Stephen Mazoh & Co.
Jason McCoy, Inc.
Robert Miller Gallery
Donald Morris Gallery, Inc.
Otto Naumann, Ltd.
The Pace Gallery
Pace Master Prints
Rosenberg & Stiebel, Inc.
Robert Schoelkopf Gallery
Thomas Segal Gallery
Holly Solomon Gallery
Sperone Westwater
Stair Sainty Matthiesen
John C. Stoller & Co
David Tunick, Inc.
Valley House Gallery, Inc.
Washburn Gallery
Worthington Gallery, Inc.
Richard York Gallery
Zabriskie Gallery

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NILES SPENCER



"South Norwalk," 1948, oil on canvasboard, 12" x 16"

WASHBURN GALLERY

41 East 57th Street New York 10022

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 503
New York NY 10019

Second Class Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED